

Art on our Mind



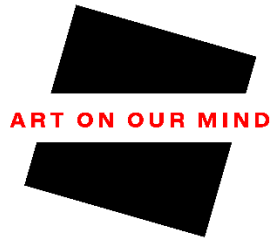
Lallitha Jawahirilal, *Makebelief and poetry of passion* (n.d.)

Nontobeko Ntombela

Wits School of the Arts

Creative dialogue | 8 September 16.30h
Seminar Room | School of Fine Art | Somerset Street





Art on our Mind Creative Dialogue

Public dialogue with:
Nontobeko Ntombela

8 September 2017
Department of Fine Art, Rhodes University, Grahamstown

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Dialogue begins:

(00:50)

Sharlene Khan: "Okay, so thanks everyone for coming to our second *Art On Our Mind* event, public dialogue with Nontobeko Ntombela. For those of you who don't know Nonto - and I hope she's going to allow me to call her Nonto - she's a curator from Wits School of the Arts [University of the Witwatersrand] and we are going to go into her trajectory as an artist, a scholar and a curator in a short while. So we'd like to say firstly thank you to Nonto for making herself available for this session, 'cause it really is a little bit of an honour to start off our one-on-one sessions with someone who does identify as a black feminist, rather than having to drag somebody into that frame. And so Nonto and I know each other for quite a number of years, we were younglings back in Durban when we were studying. And at certain point, were you also in Third Eye [artist collective in Durban during the 2000s]?"

(01:56)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Ja, towards the end."

(01:58)

Sharlene Khan: "Ja, so we all kind of went through this collective that was started by Gabi Ngcobo, called Third Eye Collective along with people like Khwezi Gule and Zama Dunywa, Thando Mama. At that time Thando was like high-styling so he didn't want to know me so much. *(laughter)* So it's good to actually see some faces as well from back in the days and how many of us have ended up moving away from Durban actually, because eventually you kind of hit the ceiling in Durban, right? And so many of us eventually had to leave for other parts of the country. And so let me just explain the format because this is the first of the one-on-one dialogues, it really is a dialogue. I am going to be, for the first hour, asking Nonto a bunch of questions around her inspirations, her influences, the challenges she faces in the artistic field both locally and globally. Getting to know her a bit more, as a public figure as well, who has curated what I think is one of three most important curatorial shows in the last twenty years in South Africa. And then we will have like half an hour of slightly quirky questions based on the Marcel Proust questionnaire, and which has been taken up by people like Bernard Pivot and James Lipton into the *Inside The Actor's Studio*. So if some of this format seems a little bit familiar, it's because I love *Inside The Actor's Studio* and so I have appropriated it from James Lipton. So we will get to humanise Nonto a little bit through that questionnaire. And then lastly, for the last half an hour, we open the floor up to you to ask questions to Nonto about herself, her practice about the industries in which we work. So, let me start off with some really basic stuff. Where where you born and what did your parents do for a living?"

(04:13)

Nontobeko Ntombela: *(laughter)* "Are we are going there?" *(laughing)*

(04:14)

Sharlene Khan: "We are going way back."

(04:15)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Oh my God, I didn't expect that. My parents were both teachers, primary school head of schools. Yeah, I grew up in Empangeni - started off in the rural areas, near a place called KwaMbonambi, if any of you would know that. But for the larger part of my

childhood, I grew up in a township called Ngwelezane, which was in Empangeni. Attended school at John Ross College and then Technikon Natal I guess."

(04:59)

Sharlene Khan: "So going to John Ross College, which was a Model-C school, what influence did that have on you accessing art?"

(05:09)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "I guess that's probably a point in which ideas which were... my father had attended **Ndalen** School for Teachers. It's a college for teachers, and it seems to me in what he was doing his degrees there, there were art classes that he had taken. So I grew up in a home where his sketches were all over the place. And John Ross College was I suppose, a place in which this love sort of had a place, because I could take up art as a subject. Ja, and moving, I remember going to that, it was those years when you were choosing which subjects you were going to focus on, and one day I went to the accounting class because I'd been told I was very good with Business Economics and Accounting. And my mother had bought me all my stationery for Accounting. The next day I couldn't go to the Accounting class, I ran to the Art class. And I suppose the rest is history."

(06:21)

Sharlene Khan: "So you did it up until Matric?"

(06:23)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Ja."

(06:26)

Sharlene Khan: "So you mentioned how you've encountered art through your dad but what kind of other kinds of creativities did you grow up with?"

(06:34)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "I mean apart from, I think, I suppose again earlier on, my primary school back in the day and many people recognise this – there was always the Arts and Craft course. And my mom taught that class where you knitted your aprons and beaded... being taught how to be a girl, I suppose. And so that was, as far as engaging, I knew no one who was an artist growing up, going to museums was only when I started going to Technikon Natal. So, I suppose it was those elements in the household."

(07:48)

Sharlene Khan: "Okay, so you applied to Technikon Natal to study graphic design, and then no, to the Cape Technikon to study Graphic Design and you also applied to Technikon Natal to do Fine Arts, but you eventually ended up choosing Technikon Natal with the Fine Arts and you majored in Printmaking. So what was it about Printmaking that drew you to it, say versus Painting or Sculpture or Design?"

(08:15)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "I suppose it was a really intuitive, maybe careless choice, because I felt like everyone was doing Painting and Sculpture, but I also like I suppose the process of Printmaking, which kind of... in a way you start off with an idea but you never really know the end result. But you can almost guarantee the process, what it will give you at the end. And maybe those ideas, process-based ideas were very important for me, and I suppose they have been supportive in the trajectory of my curatorial work. So Printmaking was also, it kind of kept with this idea of drawing which I really liked a lot, that the idea of keeping your frame manageable, in a way sounds very anti-art or anti-creative and expressive, but for me I suppose that was just for control."

(09:26)

Sharlene Khan: "I'm glad you said that, cause we all know this about printmakers ne - that control element."

(09:32)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "So I really liked that idea that I could understand the process and be part of a process in its unfolding. Obviously with hope of some chance of some things being disrupted in the process of that happening. Ja, and the process of Printmaking kind of came out of that. And of course the buzz in the Printmaking studio was probably more exciting than other studios, although we had - I mean Thando would attest - we were on the top floor of the seventh, seventh floor, S block, Technikon Natal. Ja, it had its own energies and a community that you kind of enjoyed, and I suppose all of those things inform the way that you kind of gravitate towards something."

(10:19)

Sharlene Khan: "I think you are also making a key point for some of our students here in the audience that very often the people that you study with, end up being your peers in the field as well. So, kind of pay attention to some of your peers. So what has been your trajectory since then?"

(10:36)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Shortly after finishing my diploma, I had an opportunity to go to a residency in Scotland for about three months. And that was, sort of, I think, was a turning point, I guess, for me because it was that moment whether I was going to be an artist or not be an artist. And so it gave me a moment to reflect my own process. I had an opportunity to work at the University of Dundee, and they had really amazing printmaking facilities there - things that, you know, a lot of new technology that I wasn't familiar with and spent Christmases, snowy Christmas, which was a first time for me. But I was very lucky that I had really loving friends. I spent my Christmas at a place called Kudkudberry (11:56), it's a long name. Robert Burns was born there, the poet. And so that was a moment that was very foundational for me to decide whether I wanted to pursue a career in art. For me it was always clear that I wanted to be an artist, but I also had this other desire of collaboration. And in the space of being at the University of Dundee, and then I went to a centre called Dumfries Galloway Centre and worked a lot with a lot of artists and there was a lot of collaboration, of course again it kinda disrupted this idea of printmaking as a very isolated process, and suddenly there was a community of people. There was a number of projects that came out of that, that involved schools and I was keen on this idea

of practicing in collaboration. When I came back, I don't think I ever made a print after that. But it was clear for me that I liked the idea of collaboration."

(12:52)

Sharlene Khan: "What were your early experiences as an Art graduate potentially thinking of becoming an artist? And how did the switch to curating happen? So you've spoken now about this experience in Scotland and the residency, but how does that switch completely happen to: okay, I'm not going to make art anymore, that the art making is going to become curating."

(13:17)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Of course I continue to make art, but I didn't make print because of cause there are other practical issues with printmaking is that you realize outside the university, where do I find a press? I went back to complete my B.Tec [Bachelor of Technology], but parallel to that I started working at the BAT Centre [Bartel Arts Trust, Durban]. I did a series of projects with them. A lot of the projects were around arts education. At the same time, I was working with Arts for Human Rights Trust [in Durban], now they are called Art For Humanity and I was their Portfolio Manager. They have projects around print portfolios where they commission artists to produce prints around a particular theme, and that for me started to... I suppose I was convinced and I remember Joseph Gaylard saying to me, how do you become an artist and a curator? And those were questions that started in my head, I started thinking about them, but I was convinced that I was going to be a curator and an artist, all at once. And working with Artists For Human Rights Trust, I was in charge of looking after this collection of their portfolios: numbering them, keeping registries; they were being sold to collectors and I was involved in the administration of it. And more and more that kind of took over my time while I was still doing a B Tech [Bachelor of Technology] in Fine Arts. I completed the B Tech. At that time, I had moved from Art for Humanity to working full-time at BAT Centre as a curator. And I suppose there is no linear time that I said I stop making art and I become a curator. I remember I had a two-man show at the KZNSA [KwaZulu-Natal Society for the Arts, Durban] with a friend Bronwyn Vaughan-Evans, who at the time, it was a culmination of work that I had produced for my B Tech work, that I sort of wanted to gauge whether that had a public reception. And it was really an interesting moment - there was really interest in my work. At some point I think I

started working with MOMO Gallery [in Johannesburg]. And then there was a conversation with Khwezi [Gule] at some point, and Khwezi said to me, "you can only praise one god". And that I suppose, disrupted something in my space. I had moved from, by that time, I was working at the DUT [Durban University of Technology] Art Gallery and collections were more fascinating for me. And more and more, even when I was working at the BAT Centre, there was always this question 'so who do you promote first'? Do you promote your own work as an artist or do you promote other artists. So yeah, there wasn't a moment but it was all of these questions that were coming up in becoming both of these, I suppose, institutions (for lack of a better word), which one takes up more of my time? And then another conversation with a friend who said ja, you should continue making art but I said, well, can my creativity not exist in another way other than producing work as an artist because, of course, there is this competition that is happening in my head between one that makes artwork and the one that engages collaboratively with other people. So let's leave it to that before I confuse my story."

(17:15)

Sharlene Khan: "And then from the BAT Centre, you went on to?"

(17:18)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "BAT Centre was immediately after finishing my B Tech."

(17:24)

Sharlene Khan: "As a curator-administrator?"

(17:25)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "2001. BAT Centre was in two fold. I started off with the training programme, but that was only for a year and a half. Shortly after that they appointed me as a curator. I worked as a curator for three years. They had two galleries: the Menzi Mcunu Gallery upstairs and they had the Democratic Gallery downstairs, and both were quite interesting times because while it was about bringing content but also working with the artists that were working in the studios. From BAT Centre I then did a public art project for the Minister of KZN [KwaZulu-Natal province], then it was, I'm going to confuse his name, Sibusiso Ndebele, who

had the project with the **Heritage Trust Amafa ama-KwaZulu-Natal**. And they wanted to do commemorations on the Zulu kings. They were interested in this idea of expanding the representation of history within the public space. And the one project that I realize was the statue of King Dinuzulu which is near the City Campus, DUT. So from there I was very fortunate to have my daughter, and I suppose life's responsibilities demanded me to be in a more stable institution. I was then offered a job at DUT to run the gallery at DUT. I was with them for about I think four or five years. And that was an interesting process because I think in all those years, I'd been involved a lot with sort of NGO [non-governmental organization] community-based work, and suddenly I was in this academic space working with the collection in a very, very institutional way. And ja, I think that challenged the way in which I was thinking about art, art collections, exhibitions and so forth."

(19:37)

Sharlene Khan: "And how do you end up at Wits after DUT?"

(19:41)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "So at DUT, after three years, I was in this very awkward position where I was neither an academic, neither admin/support staff. And this ambivalence was always the case, there was no demand to engage intellectually with the collection, but, and the excitement was first how to sort out this collection, get its inventories in order... and that was going fine, but every time I produce an exhibition, for me, the questions around what does it mean to be producing an exhibition, was in a way reaching its ceiling. I felt I wasn't able allowed to ask those questions because I had no - that required me to ask those questions academically in a way. Then I decided to do a **Masters [in Art History]**, I think that was 2007. Started Masters at DUT and after, I think it was the first year, I got offered the Ford Foundation Scholarship. I was so excited because I thought oh, I can take a year off and I can focus on this Masters. It is allowing me to ask questions in relation to the collection. I can produce a whole series of exhibitions around this Masters and then Ford Foundation told me that actually you can only use this money to sister universities that we have got an agreement with. You can go anywhere in the world, we will help you find a university. And the first thing because, doing the Masters at DUT, I had asked Thembinkosi Goniwe to be my co-supervisor. I was very interested in continuing with that

conversation, but also for me it was really important to think about if I were to go anywhere else, but the interest of my content is here, what sense does it make to be studying in Germany or in the US when my content of interest are in South Africa? And so the decision was to then move to Johannesburg and to do a Masters with Thembinkosi, cause I'd initially been interested in him. And my partner at the time was also offered a job in Johannesburg so it made sense to move to Johannesburg. Started the Masters [in Art History] in 2010 at Wits, so I had to do the whole process again, start afresh. And I think by that time my research questions had changed - I was no longer obliged to speak to the collection per se, I could ask any question. And I was interested in this relationship I had with some of the artists that I had become fond of, and I was always interested in my position as a woman artist and I was always interested in where does that history, where does my history as an artist locate itself. The first question that I was interested in is you know, kind of understanding black women artists positioned within the arts, how have they entered the art world. And so I was able to do that with this Masters without necessarily linking it back to the collection at DUT, because they'd granted me a year's leave at that time. So that led me to the project with Gladys Mgudlandlu later on. And that is how I landed up at Wits."

(23:21)

Sharlene Khan: "And that's how you ended up at JAG [Johannesburg Art Gallery]?"

(23:22)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "So yes, the first year at Wits, which was in tandem, I had been offered..., a whole lot of things started happening. I had started this Masters but at the same time MTN Art Foundation had also commissioned me to produce the exhibition many of you would know, the *MTN New Contemporaries*, and all of these moments I think were very, very critical at that particular moment. I get offered this commission to produce an exhibition on looking at the landscape of artists in South African contemporary art and I could select four artists, and I was quite - I'll speak to that project later on - but I was quite intrigued at this particular moment of being able to do this fascinating project. Then I was doing my Masters. Later in the year of doing this Masters, JAG then sort of offers me a job to work there as a Curator of their Contemporary Collection. That's how I land up at JAG and vice versa, how I ended up at Wits."

(24:37)

Sharlene Khan: "Okay, just before we move on. You talk about that you always have an interest in women artists and I just want to take a moment to kind of highlight some women in Durban. They kind of set the trend for that, right? Because Nise Malange, Pat Khoza, Phumzile Dlamini... and their little *Women's Day* exhibitions that they used to run at Durban Art Gallery and the *Heritage Day* exhibitions. I mean now as our careers have grown, those seem like really small little ventures, but they remain quite important I think, in the trajectory, right?"

(25:21)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Yeah, and I think perhaps, maybe going back a little bit, as a student there was always this BAT Centre *Women's Day* exhibition."

(25:30)

Sharlene Khan: "Do you remember that one, we did this huge mural where we commemorated all the women - the Women's Day march, right?"

(25:41)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "I think Dineo was still part of that as well."

(25:42)

Sharlene Khan: "No, Zama."

(25:43)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Zama and ja, I think later on... So I think I was part of like four editions and that was my introduction to BAT Centre. And I suppose those were the influences of asking yourself: you're participating in this exhibition for Women's Day, what does it mean to be a women artist? Ja, you are quite right, I mean those were the foundations."

(26:12)

Sharlene Khan: "So you teach currently in the Wits School of Arts in the Department of History of Art and Heritage. So, small question: what is the relationship you try to establish between a history of art and heritage?"

(26:29)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Same relationship (*laughs*). I think I've always been outside both of those disciplines. I was hired 50% Heritage because Heritage had been interested in the curating programme. They were interested in sort of history museum, sort of curatorial practices. And history of art has been interested in this idea of expanding the understanding of History of Art, and they were interested in how curatorial practice was feeding into that expansion. And so I was hired to come and sort of broaden that programme for them, for I still think this day, I have always kind of approached it as someone who is coming with a totally different bias to both disciplines. I never really sat quite..., saw myself as an art historian or a heritage expert in any sense. I sort of came in with the understanding that curating for me had been this sort of, evolving practice. So, going into those departments I sort of navigated both these interests, wanting to also break away from this mould of working institutionally. I was interested in... I took up the position to reflect on my own practice. I've been curating for ten years, working institutionally as a curator for ten years. I'd come to a point where I wanted - and the Masters was part of that - wanting to ask questions around what does it mean to be a curator. So I came into that platform very clear that those questions were answering themselves in the disciplines. But what I was doing was producing a conversation around curatorial practices that allowed for Heritage students to ask their questions, History of Art students to ask their questions around thinking about the curatorial. And we also had students from the Digital Arts who were also a part of that. And I mean as a result of that, a series of other courses have come out thinking about how to expand, because of course I don't believe in teaching curating through a module because it's practical. So I've always also come into that, you know you go to the discipline of History of Art and there is always this understanding that there is 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 steps, but you can't really do them in curating - it's something that you have to... it's an applicable sort of process. So as a result of that, about three other courses have been developed, the one is Exhibition Histories, because of course if you think about, I suppose Art History's interest in how you expand this notion of art history. The convention is to study mediums, the convention is to study movements,

the convention is to study how artworks and artists have accumulated or accented it in particular ways within the discourse, but what became really apparent in coming in with curatorial practice, was to think about sites and moments in which art gets encountered. So what does that encounter actually mean coming into understanding happenings for instance, understanding events, understanding site specific art, understanding exhibitions that have become significant? And there is a whole range of work that still needs to be done in recovering those histories, because, I mean, the idea of the studio as an exhibition space. Art history, it's the object that has been studied so much in the Art History discourse, but they are events that inform how that objects has been encountered. So that has been my focus really."

(30:59)

Sharlene Khan: "Okay, so I am going to jump a little bit between your exhibitions. I'm not really following a chronological order here."

(31:07)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "I have not been talking in chronology either."

(31:11)

Sharlene Khan: "So in France you curated the *Spectaculaire* residency with artists Donna Kukama, Pamela Sunstrum, Thenjiwe Nkosi and the Made You Look collective. And in the media press about it, the 'Spectaculaire' is described as more than a spectacular moment, but rather as an experienced moment, a staging or a performance. So can you tell me a bit more about this concept and what this experienced moment means for performative stagings and in which context?"

(31:41)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "I spoke about collaborations, but I suppose maybe what I should have emphasized was relationships. I got invited by an institution called **FRAC** in France to invite artists who could come with me on a residency. I was interested, again, in working collaboratively with artists that I had been following for some time: Pam, Donna - Donna was part of a project I had done earlier. In fact all of the artists that I'd invited, I had been following

and had moments of having projects with them. And I was interested in this idea of what a residency means, this moment of occupying some form of citizenship for a short period of time, thinking about your practice, being this particular community and producing work, and how does the idea of a residency translate itself as an exhibition. So I knew that the people I was inviting, those were conversations that I had had with them over some time. Made You Look as a collective, that I like the way that they are thinking about social aspects. Both Moilemo and Nare have been interested in this kind of social anthropology of working in communities and documenting oral history. So there have been fascinating ideas of how does one take up this particular space of being in residence and being a foreigner in that particular space but applying a social aspect and thinking about oral history. So I wanted to bring people who would be able to break that and be challenged by the space and they were. And suddenly they in this French speaking context and having to think about their practice, about these social conversations that are happening outside. Similarly, Thenjiwe Nkosi, whose work is about this idea of portraiture, portraiture that takes in the form of either buildings, space and how architecture is about how humans navigate a particular space and its histories. And so she was interested in botany in that particular moment and started talking to botanists and how the buildings eventually became this plant. So I knew the people I was bringing in - Pamela's interest in the land and how land can become this alter space in her drawings, was in a space, both artists are concerned about space and how they were going to bring... space was the moment for us and we all remember being - it was two weeks or a week, no I lie, it was four days, we arrived and they said to us okay come tell us what you are going to do, but it was a residency, what are we supposed to do? We don't know what the residency is going to yield and what work. And again working with an institution that, in how residencies have been sort of in a way, changed from a residency of being a studio for a particular moment, to being this, I suppose a solution for transporting people and having exhibitions and objects produced in a particular moment. And we wanted to challenge that. So when they asked us what you are going to produce, I remember Pam saying, "we don't know what we are making, but it is going to be spectacular". And we wanted to produce something that was going to again subvert this idea of spectacular, subvert this idea of producing something that's an object. We wanted it to be process-based, it was about being in a particular place, thinking about our own work, and that work being a process that informs other kinds of work. So this resistance of producing an actual object became part of the making of the exhibition."

(35:56)

Sharlene Khan: "I guess it's an important point you are touching on about residencies, because if you think of kinda the Triangle Arts workshops and residencies in the 70s and 80s, they were driven by that impulse of experimentation and process. And we are like thirty years later now, and suddenly it is all about the exhibition that's being produced. So like, if you go for a two week workshop, one week is for making and then just when you are getting into it, suddenly it is all about display again. And so I think it is also about a problem that we are having were that spirit of experimentation is really faltering."

(36:36)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "That is true. All of these things I suppose are administrative solutions to an economic crisis. I mean the other sort of discomfort while we were there, there was constantly, "oh we must have studio visits, oh you must have people coming and speaking to you, hmmm, who do you want to speak to?" And that space of just playing, was suddenly sort of like, so choreographed, and it took away again the space of saying actually we want it to be - I suppose this was my agenda, was to have a space, a consolidated space over a month or two, together, just brainstorming ideas with these people I had found very fascinating and speaking to different things that they do over time. So you can see how the economics of... it's easier to shift people around and, of course, you can parade people, "we've got these artists, come see them", that also disrupts the process of making work, but we also try to work with all of those challenges. But like you say, these things take away the impulse of making, the impulse of playing, the impulse of experimenting and producing work much more freely. And suppose this burden of having to produce an object at the end of it, is something that I suppose institutions are trying to overcome the challenge of transporting work, shipping work for exhibitions, because at the end of that residency, in fact, most of the works were actually bought by the institution."

(38:23)

Sharlene Khan: "But what does it mean to have a curator with artists in a residency? Because you're not talking about like the Art Omi kind of residency [in New York] where there is a

curator just in discussion with artists and is kind of being just a witness. You're talking more about a collaboration here. But what does that actually mean?"

(38:45)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Textually I have sort of expressed curating as reader, collaborator, sounding board, person to have a conversation with. For me, I said my curatorial practices informed by asking a series of questions. My practice was also being informed by wanting to know more deeply about an artist's practice, rather than, what you've also critiqued as a process of window shopping, and only coming at the end of the process. So this was important – I mean I had the option of inviting artists to go over and then coming at the end of the residency and producing an exhibition. And that for me was contrary to what I wanted to produce. I wanted to be with everyone as a way of really engaging and asking questions and having conversations. It's not to make work with an artist, but it is about trying to overcome what's usually a barrier around how works get misappropriated because there is never really enough time to have a conversation and understand artist's work. I say this because I know making work as an artist, myself, that there is always this kind of a tussle between a moment of having a studio visit for an hour towards producing an exhibition, rather than having a series of conversations that lead to an exhibition."

(40:30)

Sharlene Khan: "So you did, during this residency, you guys did engage on the streets or with communities, and I wanted to ask you a question about your view on art and activism, because, on the one hand, you are the scholar, that's placed within this very formal academic institution, but you've also been in a space like JAG or BAT Centre moving kind of between informal community centres and kind of very staid formal structures. But then also we see here with the human rights Art For Humanity that you've worked in spaces like those but also Dala [in Durban] with Doung [Jahangeer], and at one stage I think with the Dala organization you were doing tours through the Early Morning Market in Durban, so I wanted to find out if you could tell us a little bit about that and sort of what your views are on the tension between art and activism."

(41:30)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Eish. That's a very difficult question because I think activism is understood differently by different people. Ja, eish, ja, my brain is all over the place. My work with Dala, was again a frustration of how art institutions – and we spoke about a gallery without walls – it was premise on this understanding that art happens on the every day, that exhibitions are happening everywhere. We go and we take for granted the walking and the things that we see around us. Doung, whose an architect, was very much, you know that is part of his practice, was against this idea of structure, of permanent structure, but wanting to understand how a foot-path for instance, is a structure in itself because it speaks about how people occupy a particular space. So for me, as someone who was within an institution, I've always wanted to have sort of spaces of calming yourself from the institution, and I have always had parallel projects with working within an institution because I have always felt that they inform how I could speak back to the limitations of working within an institution. So being part of Dala was, it's activist in a sense that it's about saying that the every day is acknowledged as an institution in itself. The idea of going to the Market shouldn't necessarily... and it was also centered around this idea that we use cars so much that we like mouse and cheese, you go and find the cheese, you go back home and you drive back home and you never really explore a particular place. I worked at DUT for so long that driving from my house to DUT had a route and you by-pass the Market. But going to the market you can't drive through the market, you have to walk through the Market. So one can sort of theorise that as an activist, as an act that is activist, of walking through these spaces that informed even our growing up. The market is a place in which we connect to it far more deeply. But what does it mean when you are a curator and understanding that this particular aesthetic is actually an aesthetic that I could transport into a gallery space? To a large extent it starts challenging me in this idea of the cube, how do I break out of the cube in the way that I think about display techniques, how do I challenge this idea of what constitutes an art exhibition in the way that it is presented to the public. So there's many different folds, and Rike Sitas is very much into this idea of revolting against formality, revolting against this kind of institution, socialism... so the three of us were, I suppose, this collective that was concerned about moving away both spaces, informal and formal, how did they find a place, and seeing ourselves as catalysts of being the transition between these two spaces."

(45:25)

Sharlene Khan: "Also if you look at architecture as curation - urban curation - and I think for those of us coming from Durban, it's quite... I mean, of course post-apartheid, there have been lots of wonderful things that the ANC [African National Congress] Metro has done in Durban. But also the kind of gentrification that the Amphitheatre flea market¹ for me was always something that I grew up with, or Water Wonderland², and those kinds of spaces that were cheap and affordable, and that's what I remember about Durban and now all of that is gone. Somebody's decided that's not the best place for publics and they have cleaned that up or they've made it expensive."

(46:08)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "It's about keeping people out and it is about a particular kind of ordering of how society should operate, forgetting that these things are infused. Well, on the one hand, I always appreciated Durban for its persistence in being the informal and formal collapsed all the time, even when these push backs happened. I think that when I go back to Durban, I'm not, I haven't lived there long enough to understand where the informal spaces are, but I feel like they are there, they are in front of us, it's just that because you are outside and you are coming back in, and you're seeing all these new structures that the resistance of the informal is still there. And being in Durban for so long, it was easy to know because you lived in it for so long. ja, strangely, which I don't feel in Cape Town. I feel like Cape Town, the exclusion of people are there, fancy places there, these things only meet when it's about labour exchanges. Durban doesn't feel that way. The fact that you can still get a taxi going "Wheelie Wheelie Wheelie"³ catch in town and you can catch hop in and hop out of a taxi, still it is part of that resistance, I feel."

(47:30)

Sharlene Khan: "So we've just gone briefly through your different roles, right. You've functioned as artists, project manager, workshop facilitator, administrator, lecturer, curator. So

¹ A flea-market that used to be held in the Amphitheatre on the Durban North Beach.

² A water park that was situated on the Durban North beach.

³ The Wheel was a shopping mall in Durban South beach area. "Wheelie" is the chant of the taxi conductor indicating their route.

what do all of these roles and experiences bring to who you are? But also, how does it help you to kind of bridge the rift or the chasms that there are between theory and practice for your students? How do you bridge this gap as an educator, as well as in your creative methodologies?"

(48:13)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Hmmm. Repeat that question." (*laughter*)

(48:16)

Sharlene Khan: "This is why I didn't want to send it to you in advance. (*laughter*) So the audience knows that this is like fresh, live, right? (*laughter*) So the question is really..."

(48:25)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Use simple English please." (*laughter*)

(48:28)

Sharlene Khan: "So all these various roles right, I mean it's quite a lot of roles to have had in one short lifetime already."

(48:33)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "It's long."

(48:34)

Sharlene Khan: "No. (*laughter*) You know, facilitator, administrator, project manager, curator, now you are kind of an art historian scholar. So how does all of these kind of experiences, how does it help you to bridge the gap for your students between theory and practice, cause we know - and we've spoken about this - you keep saying these fictions between theory and practice, these divides are just fictions that we've inherited from colonial practices. And we keep fighting these fights that don't need to exist even and we've taken up fights that don't belong to us. So how is all these experiences helped you to kind of bridge that gap for your students, as well as how do you think through that in your own creative methodologies?"

(49:24)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "I think I said it earlier, that there's actually no linear space to start. Theory and practice are co-existent, but theory is informed by practice. My sense is that, having gone out of the university, worked in places like BAT Centre, informed the impulse of what I wanted to know. By the time I decided to do a Masters, I knew it was itching at me. You know I knew it was my interest and what I wanted to ask because I'd been in the place of practice enough to know what the theoretical questions I wanted to ask. And so in my teaching and the way that I think about teaching curating, has always been at that place of saying to students, think about the question that burns you, the things that really interest you, then how does that speak back to the way that we theorise. And it goes back to this idea that, you know, the teacher is the one with authority and then you are kind of telling this theory and you are holding authority, that I try and make my classroom about a conversation. I try and make my classroom about the information that the student has, is as important as much as it is about how to fuse this in understanding how we both learn. Places like the project that I have been part of for three years, which is called ASIKO - which is a roaming school and has been run by Nigerian curator, Bisi Silva, many of you will know her - has been again another place for me to disrupt this idea that the academy needs to shift away that it structures knowledge, it structures the classroom, that it is about knowledge happens and practice happens there. That's where you source the theory versus the theory that you hold in speaking to the context. So how does one push back against that platform where the insistent is, there's Derrida and there's Foucault, we must then think of the world through Derrida and Foucault. But how Derrida and Foucault theorised, came up with their theories based on what they were observing outside. And that's the premise in which the register constantly needs to default back is that there's so much of the holding of knowledge that informs this versus that, so how do we think through visual arguments, how do we think through experiential arguments rather than the theories that inform what we think. And so I think once you start tossing with those ideas, Njabulo Ndebele has been quite informative for me in thinking about ways of teaching because his idea of 'domesticated knowledge'⁴ has been at the premise of where I start - is that knowledge is there at the place of making, as we were talking about, the market, that's where the exhibition aesthetics is. Well I do in reading

⁴ See Njabulo Ndebele's book *The Rediscovery of the Ordinary*.

about exhibition making and the white cube is great because it is also informed by a particular place and context, but how is my place of living and making - how the environment, the energy, the air - allowing me to speak back and start thinking about the theories that have been generated and rethinking theories in my space. So there's this constant desire to rethink what we mean by 'intimate knowledge', what we mean by 'domesticated knowledge', as proposed by Ndebele."

(54:02)

Sharlene Khan: "Okay, so I want to look at one of your exhibitions with the 2010 MTN New Contemporaries. Taylor, can you go to the next slide?"

(54:14)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Ja, this was a very, very busy year. As I said, I was invited by MTN Art Foundation. They'd been running this competition for ten years and this was probably their revision year, and I was asked to produce an exhibition, which problematically becomes a format of a competition, identifying four artists in South Africa that were, by their terms, critically acclaimed or cutting edge. And I had the opportunity to travel across the country, very, very exciting because suddenly I encountered - I remember I think I was literally living at the airport, my suitcase jumping from one place to another. It was quite an honour because it's a project that people like Thando, yourself, have been part of - Khwezi Gule, Melissa [Goba]... so you know, it has been brought into quite a prestigious space and be acknowledged for my contribution. I hadn't been in Durban for so long, I didn't think anyone was paying attention, so to be nominated to curate that project was suddenly asking me, "oh, you are a curator, so show us what it is you do as a curator". And, also, suddenly having to say, how do I respond to a contemporary practice in South Africa? So, I think nine provinces later, I had to sit with this research and think about what represents contemporary art then in four artists' work, which was a huge challenge. And I'd noticed how there was a return of sculpture, but there was this juncture in the return of sculpture and performance. So the artists that were invited were Stuart Bird, Donna Kukama, Mohau Modisakeng and Kemang, both who were very, very young at that point in their career, but for me it was really exciting to see how they were thinking about the body as a sculptural form, but the body and performance and being ways of infiltrating space and exhibition. And so what was also nice was that they were able to, I was able to commission them to produce work which was

also very new to me - I'd always been scratching around to find budgets for printing an invite, let alone being able to commission an artist. So again, like what does it mean to be a curator was another shift - how do I speak to processes of making work that was to be made towards an exhibition and not necessarily inviting artists based on work that they've produced already. Stuart Bird here,⁵ was interested in destructing this idea of artists as this precarious position that artists occupy as labour and he did a kind of holistic performance where he was critiquing both the inside and outside of the KZNSA. This exhibition happened in Durban, and so he decided to find a plot outside in the garden and started digging, digging soil that he was dumping inside of the gallery, used soot to write around the gallery, again disrupting this neat idea of the cube, provoking this idea of what art and how art has become commercialized, how the artist has become this labour, producing these commodities that are to be sold. So this particular work, there was on the side of the gallery a "counter counter-revolution", "coming to a town near you". Again, this idea of the competition they were provoking and I was also interested in that myself that in previous shows, it seemed to me that there was a lot of conforming to - it's a competition, people get cubes and they produce work that don't necessarily speak to each other. And this particular show for me, it was, I suppose I had literally taken it as a challenge to say what do you mean by curating. And as I understand it, maybe I will change my mind later, but as I understand it, the role of the curator for me sits between two/three, a triangle and it is about negotiating the relationship between the institution, between publics and between artists and their objects. And so how do you navigate as a curator, a narrative that engages these three elements, but an extension to that, there's another important role I think, that is to construct narratives within a space. How do you propose a question that the exhibition allows to be, sometimes, answered and not answered? So I was interested in how this particular show was going to - artists that were brought in - were going to be speaking to one another. Can we move to the next slide?⁶ So as Stuart Bird was continuing with this performance, also critiquing the idea of the object - so you have this relationship between this particular matter/substance in relation to his other sculptures. He is known for his very meticulous sculptural work - this particular piece again was critiquing the idea of commerce, it was critiquing this idea of business and who is in power, this idea of Christmas gift, made with this form using a tie. And then in relation to Mohau who again was

⁵ Referring to Figs. 1 and 2.

⁶ Referring to Fig.2.

making really serious political questions - and both of them were - and the relationship between the two of them - so soil in relation to Mohau's work and soil in relation to Stuart Bird's, was suddenly this interesting conversation. Mohau was talking about **ugukatha**, which is a game but a very political game that kids - he describes kids that play in the streets - where kids, I think most common is the stick fighting. So if you pick up the soil and you clap it together, that would mean that there will be this game of fighting. So he's got these images that were in relation again to the promise pin, which was critiquing this idea that the political pins that people associated them, were a promise that was slowly and surely becoming empty or didn't resonate with people anymore. If we move to the next slide⁷ ... this work, which was made by Stuart Bird in relation to Mohau's knife. So again he's got this okapi which is made, a large piece, he makes his critique around violence and the violence of the body, and Stuart Bird making this idea of the artist hanging himself, making this noose. There was this almost... ja, one can't calculate enough how you construct these conversation, and this is the beauty I suppose of being privileged to curate, is that you are able to make these connections. You can only have an idea and once you're in this space, you start seeing these connections come to life. Then there was a performance of **amabuto**, which was dove-telling from a previous work we had made with mega films that was sculptured, critiquing this idea that of violence and the killings that happen in society. his relationship to that relationship to that relationship, you can plan it, but it happens in a very interesting way to what is inside. So it was also an interesting challenge for the judges to suddenly be confronted with not booth-like situation of this artists versus this artist to make their decision. They had to judge this as a competition. I remember there was a moment I was told that they wanted to take away the decision, to refuse to make a decision about who the winner is because they'd been confronted with a moment where everyone in that space in their minds was a winner, and the idea of it being a competition is something that works against what it was. The other artists were in different spaces so this was a central space. If you can move to the next slide⁸ ... you had Kemang. Again, soil became an interesting element, there was really strong - so the idea of the body, the relationship to land, the relationships of soil, took on many things and very, very serious political statements were being made. This idea of excavation, this idea of the archaeological site in Kemang's work, this idea of storytelling, evidence, this chalkboard, it was

⁷ Referring to Fig.3.

⁸ Referring to Fig.4.

really interesting in relation again to Stuart Bird's 'Soil Downstairs' to Mohau's use of soil, ja... Again, these were commissioned so they only materialized in space and you can only start imagining how they start having conversation. But all of these connections were made from a series of studio visits that I had done at the beginning, could never have imagined that it would translate in this particular way. So many of you would know Kemang's work and the way that he's using text and images in narrating stories. This was his earlier work. Next slide please.⁹ Donna Kukama, a performance piece that was done at Mai Mai¹⁰ of *The Swing*, which was a critique of Fragonard's *Swing*¹¹ which was about frivolity, access, this idea of indulgence. So she constructed this swing under the bridge of over Mai Mai, again critiquing the state of things, critiquing the particular sites and how what does it mean to have access, what does it mean to be swinging under this bridge. And this video - I mean quite controversially the ending is not really nice, but we won't go there - but she wanted to critique this idea, again, the idea of land comes into this work. As a performance artist it was interesting and it's been interesting working with Donna on two occasions where what do we do about the gallery space, because the gallery space is a limit for Donna. She's a performance artist, her performances happen by chance. They not the kind of performance that you sit and you watch - they are a disruption and they happen as people happen. And so she has this commission to produce a work and there isn't a space to exhibit, and we had long conversations about what it translates and the end. She wanted to also, in critiquing further this idea of seeing and not seeing, and access and frivolity and wealth, she went to a society, a blind community society, and wanted to engage with other performers. So she went and explained she has this performance and she wants to critique this idea of exchange, money exchange. Donna had had an idea based on her experience in Johannesburg that most places you'd find that at the traffic intersection there are people who are holding a cup, asking for money. Little did she know that Durban doesn't have that culture and suddenly arriving in Durban having missed about two flights and a week later, to discover that actually that's not a culture that exists in Durban, then decided to go to the organisation of the blind and ask for their participation. And again it suddenly shifted her work because her work is very spontaneous. She recorded - these were recordings on the radio that was making this relationship, again it was

⁹ Referring to image Fig.5.

¹⁰ Traditional market in Johannesburg.

¹¹ Jean-Honore Fragonard, *The Swing* (1767)

about money, as she was swinging at this performance at Mai Mai, she was taking out money and distributing it, because it was a critique on this idea of wealth. This particular moment she is critiquing about this idea of exchanging - who has the power of giving. She uses sound to relate this work to that earlier work. If you move onto the next slide,¹² she had then had volunteers who were working with her to perform. As people moved through the exhibition, those carrying the cups were giving out money, again suspending this idea that you give the money to the person who is holding the cup. And this was on the day of the judging, however on the day of the opening, which is the beauty of performances, is that they happen by chance, and a lot of it is left to chance, is that there were so many people, that so many people didn't see the performance. And, of course, the person who's holding the cup is wandering through the space and that's the beauty of Donna's work, is that is never is announced. I don't think I saw the performance that night, because there were so many people and it had to be cut short because of the amount of people that were there. The relationship with..."

(1:09:27)

Sharlene Khan: "I like the title *Like a Blind Man in a Dark Room Searching for a Black Cat that isn't there.*" (laughter)

(1:09:36)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Again, like the critique of the person who thinks that they are in power of giving, right, immediately when you see someone holding a cup, you are going to give them money, yet they are the ones giving you the money. So from this, I suppose there was a lot of... if we can move to the next slide.¹³ I've been thinking a lot about where this trajectory of working and having responded to a commission, I was also in a space of thinking about my own work and I was in the middle of a Masters. And I suppose I've been thinking about these conversations and I'm showing those first projects, sort of moments, I suppose, in which my career has changed and questions that I have had to ask myself. There was at the same time this other question that was asking about the relationship I have with black women artists. And that particular project on Gladys Mgudlandlu was then the other project. Do I have time?"

¹² Referring to image Fig.7.

¹³ Referring to Fig.7.

(1:10:46)

Sharlene Khan: "You continue."

(1:10:47)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Oh, alright. This project then takes place two years later after that project. Many of you - probably not many of you, I'm not going to assume - some of you have come across the exhibition *A Fragile Archive* or a documentation of it, which is all over the place and Sharlene has been scolding me about it. I'd been interested in this idea of what does it mean to be working in a space where my voice has a place. I don't want to read this, I shouldn't read it. Let's move to the next slide. (*laughter*) But I suppose (*laughter*), go back to it (*laughter*) now that it's been up.¹⁴ I've always been interested in working with black women artists - this was initially sparked by the Women's Day exhibition held annually at the BAT Centre in Durban, where I first participated as an artist from 2002 to 2001, and one before I became the curator in 2003. This curatorial focus has always been motivated by two things - first, my own position as a Black woman curator, a position that up until recently received scant professional space in South Africa, second, the position that Black women artists occupy in the art world more broadly, which has also been largely unrecognised. My interests had mostly been intuitive - an intuitive desire to foster conversations with people whose creative practice helped me unpack my own daily life. But also, how I have always been concerned with the precarious gendering, racialisation and ethnisation of black women's work in art writing and exhibition. I am interested in how black women artists respond to these complexities through the use of their voice. By voice, I do not mean the gesture of speaking, but rather a voice that can be heard through their artwork. The voice is steeped in what **Barbara Bowen** describes as a call and response in which one's work is constantly responding to past imbalances and how these imbalances affect us today. It is a conversation that foregrounds complex visual modes of expressing what concerns women artists today. Thus, my curatorial work is one that places emphasis on speaking and so the conversation that I probe with black women artists are about finding ways that enable us both to speak, for us to self-right, self-articulate, self-determine, self-represent, self-empower and, most importantly, self-care. To focus on black women artists' work

¹⁴ Referring to Fig.8.

is part of my curatorial practice, is to me not a choice, but a way of being. Gladys Mgudlandlu's exhibition culminated as a result of my Masters - it took place at the Johannesburg Art Gallery [JAG]. In relation to Gladys, she was in conversation with other artists: Valerie Desmore, Bongi Dhlomo, Allina Ndebele, Noria Mabasa, Bonnie Ntshalintshali and Helen Sebidi. I'd been interested in this idea of returning to the source, hmmm, your words... *(laughter)* I'd been interested in understanding moments in which defined the position of black women artists and this particular exhibition was for me very personal, very intense. I think I spent over five years of asking questions around this position and, as a result, I restaged Gladys Mgudlandlu's 1961 exhibition. And by restaged, it was not meant to be a replica, but I was asking a question around archives. I was asking a question around **artists-author** writing. I was asking a question around art biographical writing. If you can, I want to move very quickly. So I was interested in her voice and I'm interested in this idea of archive being this porous object that the archive gives us information but it leaves us with many, many questions. So what does it mean to be concerned about the position of black women artists today? And I was interested in this idea of agency and, hence, I emphasise, over and over again, this idea of conversation, is that in working with this exhibition, I was constantly - it was almost, I think I said to a friend of mine, I always talk to Gladys Mgudlandlu's ghost all the time, because I have to understand where she's coming from and I was very intrigued by this very vibrant person in the 60s who could speak back. Many of the newspaper clippings that I could find was her speaking back and obviously there was a lot of, what's the word, not monstrosifying her but this, this fear that was written in the way she was described, she was big and she was overpowering. She would walk into the gallery... but to me there was power, there was agency in that. And she would speak back and she would be asked and she was daring enough to say I think I can claim to be the first African woman to hold an exhibition. Wow! So those were questions for me, what does it mean to be the first and what does it mean for her to be saying that these things. And the amount of records that are sitting buried about this person that I never heard of throughout my degrees. And again that this desire, why do I feel like there's no voice that I can speak back to and I do have this history. So I produced this archive exhibition responding to that. Okay, at JAG, I don't know if many of you have been there, it's almost like this U-ish, O-ish shape. The exhibitions occupied the left side of

the gallery.¹⁵ Next slide.¹⁶ As you would encounter it, you had the text about it. One of the things that became interesting for me was this idea of the first. She had a retrospective in 2002 and I was not interested in reproducing a retrospective because she had already had one. But I was interested in how she had been written into this history. And the artist Valerie Desmore, through my research, I encounter that there is another black women artist in the 40s who again is not recognised. And so I started searching and being at JAG it was quite fortuitous that I was able to tap into networks of other museums, so I wanted to see how well represented is Valerie Desmore. She does appear in 1997 in the *Land and Lives* exhibition, but that is about the only moments she reappears into the art historical writing."

(1:18:24)

Sharlene Khan: "But why is this because we have somebody who's had a first show as a teenager in 43, she then goes in to London in 46 and then she studies at the Slade School of Fine Art. She has a fashion design career, she has a shop in Covent Garden, so this is not just somebody who just became a hobby artist or something and she only died in 2008, so why is it she still remains such an unknown figure in this country?"

(1:18:56)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Uh, eish now you are asking me political questions. I suppose the question is not disrupting formulaic ways of writing history. Certain things have to remain written in a particular way. And disrupting that, proving that that's not true, suddenly challenges a whole lot of things, challenges the methodology of writing in itself and challenges a particular discipline. Ja, I remember seeing documents of letters between The National Gallery and Johannesburg Art Gallery around the 1997 exhibition, saying that hey, there's this artist that..., and that's where she returns briefly. But nothing gets taken up afterwards. For me, the more, I suppose, the impulse response to that is that, of course, they must remain that way because otherwise it would prove a whole lot of other things, and undo a whole lot of things, that have been said about particular artists and black artists and that. In my search for how she is represented, I could only find four artworks, so this room presented that: those were the only four

¹⁵ Referring to Fig.10.

¹⁶ Referring to image Fig.11.

artworks. And I was very much about this idea of disrupting a way of viewing. Working at JAG I was always concerned about the fact that there is a particular public and a particular viewer that comes to view exhibition at JAG, and they always want more, because they want to feel comfortable that there's more. So I wanted to disrupt this idea of more because there isn't more, there is only four that's representing her. The space - move to the next page.¹⁷ This space was the, in a way I was also presenting a chronology, you have 40s, and then you have 61. And for me again this critique is like what does this jump actually mean, from the 40s to 61. I was interested in few statements that had been made in the writing of Gladys and how she had been promoted by white women and she had been presented as this figure who had been passively promoted, but this 1961 exhibition is one that she put together herself, is one that she and the Liberal Party had helped her put this exhibition. So again there was this political underlying issue that maybe it was about the fact that it was part of the Liberal Party and not what the dominant political parties - and somehow that didn't render. Those are interesting questions that come up. I go back to the archive to find only a list of works, of thirty-one works (and this was also by chance), so once you start doing research, you tap onto one thing and then boof, a whole lot of people and new information comes. So there was a collector in Cape Town. This person that I was speaking to was the grandchild of this collector, who had a list of her original catalogues, but, of course, you must remember with auction houses, many artists' works get renamed. So I have this list of thirty-one works, what do I do? How do I return to this particular moment? So there is a gentleman by the name of Randolph Vigne, who was very helpful in describing this particular moment, and I relied a lot on people giving me verbal recounts of this date. Do you want to play a little bit? I won't play all of it."¹⁸

(1:23:07)

****Audio begins [Randolph Vigne speaking]****

(1:23:33)

**** Audio ends****

¹⁷ Referring to Fig.12.

¹⁸ Referring to Vigne audio interview.

(1:23:34)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "So I mean it is seven minutes long and I won't go into it, but it was important by having this recording was that it showed doubt, and for me, the entire exhibition was about curating doubt. How do you curate this incompleteness in a space, talking about this history? How do you curate an archive that tells you more questions than actually telling you answers. And so I used a series of strategies of inserting both her voice, disrupting art historical writings to have a white male talk about her history and how through his maid, he was able to connect Gladys, suddenly disrupt this writing that she was promoted by white women. It suddenly also allows me to think about how do I insert her voice? The exhibition happened in a boardroom. What does it mean to take this particular moment, which happened in a boardroom and placing it within a museum context? The grey walls were a reference to that, which was a common colour, then the projected works were works that were owners were based in Scotland. Money versus also a desire to present this fragility and lack of access to her work, was a resolution to project the works on the wall, reference to books of works. There were moments - if we move to the next slide¹⁹ - this was the list that I had, and had to track this list against the archive file at JAG, and against a list of works that had been resold through auction houses and realised that some of the names were no longer the same. So I had original titles in vinyl and next to the works that I had to match and make guess that this particular work might have been the same work. Next to it were the current names in labels. The table was a gesture, it was not meant to be a table that was the same kind, but it was a gesture to reference the idea that this happened in the boardroom. Move to the next slide.²⁰ There were moments where, for instance, there were three works that were produced in the particular same period, had the same title and in those moments I had three of those works there, again emphasising this idea that this was about questions more than it was giving answers. The books *Land and Lives* was a very useful tool in finding works produced at that particular period. On the table, if you go back to the previous slide, there was a quote referencing her, so it was also very, very important that her voice was there. And she was very, very articulate in speaking about her work. So she gets asked about her work, if she thinks that her work is realistic, and I like her answer where she says, "to me there are" - what does she say, "but they are realistic most of them, that is how I see them". So there is

¹⁹ Referring Fig.14.

²⁰ Referring to Fig.15.

a sense of agency in her work that was for me very important for her voice to be part of it. If you can move to the next slide.²¹ Then there was the last part of this section where I suppose by chance, by luck, I encountered a collector who owned what was her own collection. Her son was working for him, they owned a windmill company. Her son, from the story I heard, was that he was being chased out of the house, and I am assuming that in his head, he thought that if I take this, whether there was a barter of some sort, if I take this to my employer, he will look after my mother's work. And that was her last of her collection. He didn't think much of it as important, threw it away into the storeroom, only remembered in 2004 after seeing Gladys' retrospective exhibition, that "oh", and that time I think that he was also selling the business, but there is valuable stuff in this. He tried to restore some of them, but he was mostly discouraged to restore them, and that's the kind of condition that they are in. It was important to also show this last moment - the artists' own archive in the exhibition. This was the last two rooms that showed this. And in the previous slide there was also an interesting moment where you could see the transition of her work. Her earlier works were mostly about landscapes, birds. Later on she moved to Nyanga, she was working a lot with urban space and still life. So this trajectory was also interesting that she kept some of her older works with her. This last part²² was an institutional critique, so I was interested in asking post-1979, the year that Mgulandlu dies, who are the artists that institutions have brought in? So I looked through JAG's collection and the black artists that they have in their collection, and I brought that out as a way of thinking, in a way, I suppose it was a comfort space - a lot of people walked in and said. "aaah, there is lots of work" - and I suppose it was my sense of, not running to present happily ever after scenario, but bringing out what is there, the kinds of recognitions that black women have received since then. I'll end there. We won't go there."

(01:28:43)

Sharlene Khan: "So how do you understand an artist biography? What does it tell us about a person and their work and how do you understand this construct as say part of black feminism or critical race or decolonial perspectives? In 'The Studious Observer's interview with Robyn Sassen you stated that "if I had no budget constraints, I would do an exhibition about the history

²¹ Referring to Fig.16.

²² Referring to Fig.18.

of exhibitions in South Africa. We have repositories of biographies, but none of exhibitions - an index to how art in this country has evolved". Could you elaborate on this?"

(01:29:18)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "You are asking two questions there. The questions that you're asking, biographical writing and then you are asking about exhibition histories. So in terms of biographical writing and how they tell us about artists, they tell us many things and as I have stated around the issue of archives, is that archives tell us things that are not there. Similarly with biographies, they tell us of things that are missing. One of the interesting things when I did the project with Gladys was to discover that she has four different birth dates and different biographies. We will never know what the real date was, because either from the carelessness of the writer or either from a whole range of other things were we know that a number of our older generation, the counting of their original birth date is a bit dodge. So on that ground when you read a biography, I always say read with cynicism and skepticism in a way, because on the one hand there's a sad element of lot of earlier biographies are inaccurate. Also because a number of times when artists were doing exhibitions it was from this point of the artist being passive and the artist being discovered. And there was a lack of committing the artist to how they are being recorded and the writing being left to those who were just scribbling things that made certain sense to certain audiences and fed to certain stereotypes, too, in writing about artists. So one has to read a biography thinking about the writer, too, and thinking about these inaccuracies, and also thinking about things that aren't there. A lot of the, again, to go back to the more recent example is that Gladys studied art in high school so she is not self-taught, you know. And even those things that exist in the biography, the idea that she is from the 60s, there is the assumption that we are reading of an artist that is self-taught. And the questions that I started asking about, writing about her, was that very fact that we need to disrupt this idea that everything is so prescribed in a particular way. She went to a missionary school and they had art. And that is how she becomes an art teacher and her art life was embodied, her house was a mural, she taught art. And these are things that David Koloane has also constantly been inaccurately recording how she is trained by certain people. Again, we are reading the writer and how the writers are writing in a particular way. Now in the case of exhibition histories, as I said to you when I was appointed at

Wits, there was this interest in seeing whether curating can become a programme on its own. And first my approach was what are the gaps and needs in terms of how the teaching of curating is being offered, and so identify courses. And one of the course was Exhibition Histories and in thinking about that was, and in thinking also and how this project with Gladys Mgudlandlu informed that. So, going back to this 1961 moment was so critical in thinking - often you get documents of the catalogue as a list, you don't get documents of exhibition layout. So you don't ever get a sense of how that work was encountered, yet it has very profound impact on how that work accents value and how it gets absorbed into our discourse. It is that particular event that informs that. So I've been interested in what does it, how, what shape would it be to start imagining a recovery of exhibitions and a history of exhibitions. **Mdali**, the projects that David Koloane were doing in Johannesburg, a whole range, the Third Eye projects that were happening, and I'm sure there's a whole range of collectives that have produced amazing moments that are undocumented. But it's not all lost, there's a way of recovering those things and I think that's a whole rich space that needs to be occupied. If we are thinking about decolonising education, if we're thinking about rewriting our own histories, it starts from saying what are the different methods that we can apply to recover this history. It's one thing to write about an artists' biography, it's one thing to write about a particular work - and here I'm saying there's other moments which is the event, which are the exhibitions, what do they mean? And some of those works we never know about, some of those moments that... and they were so... some of them that were profound in making careers of artists."

(01:35:01)

Sharlene Khan: "So if you have to give a definition of an archive, what would it be?"

(01:35:04)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Jesu!" (*laughter*)

(01:35:08)

Audience member: "What does that mean?"

(01:35:10)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Jesu?"

(01:35:13)

Audience member: "Jesus!"

(01:35:15)

Nontobeko Ntombela: (*laughing*) "An archive is a process, an archive is a thought, an archive is a memory, an archive is a document, an archive is many things. An archive is a person. I think we have far gone the idea of archive as institutions because those are the most problematic. Those are the ones that have been audited and collated through singular understandings of individuals though it has been collated through particular ideologies. So archives are many, many, many things. Ja, sorry, you said one, you said I must say one word." (*laughing*)

(01:36:13)

Sharlene Khan: "No, no, no. We should be past the one word stage. (*laughter*) Okay so you've argued that categories like 'primitive' and 'aïve', whether it is in content or stylistically, have locked Gladys and her work into certain positions. And in the *Black Artist, White Label*²³ talk, you said how this has affected an entire generation of artists. So how do we position and re-position South African artists-of-colour off an early Modernist phase and who worked in such a variety of Modernist visual languages or even refuted them?"

(01:36:56)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "There, again, I think that there are many things we have not yet even begun to start speaking to when it comes to writing about art histories. I think it's, the first one is to not think of their production through movements. I think movements default us into this art historical 'one must belong into to a particular kind of framing'. And it's also been problematic in the way that artists have been overlooked from certain movements, especially those who have refused to be participants in this movement description model. So it starts from there, once you

²³ Panel discussion held by Black Mark Critical Collective Thought at The Point of Order Gallery at Wits University, Johannesburg, on the 6th of June 2016. The panel featured Nontobeko Ntombela, Same Mdluli, Sharlene Khan, Khwezi Gule, Lwandile Fikeni in response to the exhibition *Black Modernisms* held at the Wits Art Museum.

collapse this understanding of there being a movement. I mean even calling them 'early Modern artist', even calling them 'pioneers' starts to collapse this idea of where do you start searching and who do you start searching for.? Professor Simon Gikandi once said something really, this has stuck with me, this understanding of going back to writing of biographies, going back to the writing of personal stories. And he was talking about this understanding that part of the, and you critiqued this the *Black Artist, White Labels* symposium, was this understanding that artists are encountered in groups and black artists have been in this like identity crisis of always belonging to a group. You are black artists from the 80s, you are a lot that only thinks in one singular way. But if you started to go zooming in and say how do I understand what David Koloane has been thinking about, suddenly a particular thought, concepts can emerge from focusing on that particular person's portfolio rather than saying I'm studying David Koloane on the basis that he belongs to this particular period. That switch would allow us to start understanding different ways artists were thinking at different times."

(01:39:44)

Sharlene Khan: "One of the things you've spoken about is the kind of the both the hypervisible and then the invisible paradox that Gladys, that began to shadow Gladys' life. And so I want to ask you about how does that paradox, how is that in your life at the moment because even in the *Mail & Guardian* article²⁴ a few years ago you kind of mentioned this hypervisibility and visibility paradox that many of us struggle with."

(01:40:16)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "It's our bodies, our bodies - it wants violence, aggressive, angry and they often document it as such. Similarly we are the lowest rank in society, that have been mostly abused and so this is the hypervisibility. Example - and this is, I'm going to do it - one woman at the African feminist movies say "off record"."

(01:40:55)

²⁴ Botha, N. (2015) 'Where Hypervisibility Meets True Transformation in the Arts'. *Mail and Guardian* [Online]. 6 March. Available at: <https://mg.co.za/article/2015-03-05-where-hypervisibility-meets-true-transformation-in-the-arts>

Sharlene Khan: "There's nothing off record here." (*laughter*)

(01:40:57)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "My appointment at Wits for one - when I arrived there was a Facebook post with my face, oh we've new acquisition. You're this new acquired thing. Since my appointment there have been a series of appointments of White staff members that have never made it to the Facebook post. And it's this thing of being hypervisualised to a point of obliteration, is this idea that... and the contradiction is that you become this anomaly you know of: "we have acquired a rare species." Black academic in the History of Art Department - we have broken history, we are gonna put her out there. But at the same time, can easily be discounted, "oh she's there on a basis of colour, boom, out!" Your value gets dismissed. So constantly even with Gladys there was this, when you start reading how they would describe her physique right, "this bold, big woman who walks in". Almost like you can imagine the writer in terror of this figure in the way that she is describing. And also how it's a way presented as if its generosity. The Facebook post is generosity - how we are giving you platform. The same article that was talking about transformation, if you read the entire article was how it echoed, and I talked about visibility, and she totally misquoted what I was arguing, because it was about how "there is progress, they've been given opportunity, hear, hear, hear, hear, hear, we show them, but all they do is complain about them being there and how hard it is". Because "here, here, here, a white woman who has overcome" - they are talking about how they've overcome gender oppression and so forth. And so there is this parallel and co-existence of this hypervisibility and this overlooking, and it happens simultaneously or if not, instantaneously. You know always these things are always happening at the same time."

(01:43:31)

Sharlene Khan: "So in your MA thesis, the title is *A Fragile Archive: Refiguring / Rethinking / Reimagining / Re-presenting Gladys Mgudlandlu*. So what does this 'Re-' mean for you but also what does it mean in terms of responsibility and accountability, both to Gladys and to kind of South African art history?"

(01:43:56)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "I don't know if I'm still married to the 'Re-'. I think at the time I was speaking in a position to art historical writing. Also I think I was still speaking from this point of being outside outside of, to wanting to enter in saying that there's a correction that is happening. But I think I've since moved to a space where I start thinking about why are we always sort of asking for a space to be let in rather than writing from that space of authoritativeness. And I think our register, my register is slightly shifting from wanting to rewrite, re-present, re-stage, then saying "it's actually a staging. It's an ascension that says it is happening now, it is not about... the opposition always says I'm still speaking to that writing, I'm speaking to this writing. Even the word 'alternative' to me has become quite a contentious word because I feel like we defaulting to this being in the margins. The margins are the center you know, we no longer are outside, we are in the, and the more we keep on thinking of ourselves from being outside, is the more we reinforce this idea of being outside, there being for there is a center that needs to, ja.."

(01:45:30)

Sharlene Khan: "So you spoke about how Gladys, how you've been having this kind of ghostly dialogue, this haunting with Gladys. So, has she stopped haunting you post the exhibition or is she still speaking to you?"

(01:45:43)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Always. I think that every formation of thought post that intense research space has, as I say, there are many things that are shifting and I'm constantly having to ask myself in relation to her presence, how, where do I fit in as a black woman or where does everything else fit in to my world. I don't think it will stop because it started off as something that is far deep and far, it's old and it's been with me for a long time. She just happened to be a willing ghost to speak to me, so she continues speaking to me."

(01:46:34)

Sharlene Khan: "Okay, I have three more questions and then we are done. So in a warm-up talk you raised the question: "What gave Gladys Mgudlandlu an imagination of being a visual artist in the 1960s against the history of the 50s, the 60s and then the 70s." Eduardo Glissant talks about imagination as a thing that changes people. What do you think the role of the imagination is?"

(01:47:09)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "It's a space to exist without limitation. I think it is a true space of existing, we can fly when we imagine certain things. We can... ja, I have written so many books already in my life as I have imagined them. The problem of race doesn't exist, so imagination also becomes practical in a sense. We can imagine the impossible, we can imagine the practical things so it's in a space in which we evolve and we can exercise the evolution of ourselves. So imagination is very important because without Gladys Mgudlandlu's imagination, we wouldn't be talking about a particular pioneer artist today. She relied on her imagination and she let her imagination run away with her. And so, ja it is a critical part of any existing person to imagine, to constantly imagine. Because of course I think hope and imagination are also things that are always co-existing, they are holding hands in a way. And so we have these conditions in which we are born into and we hope for, we constantly aspiring and hopeful of bettering our spaces. But it is through the imagination that those things become possible. Imagination is not an escape - in a way it can be sometimes - but imagination allows us to think about the possibilities."

(01:49:02)

Sharlene Khan: "Okay, final question. Don't look at me about the blinking camera, if it's gone we are going to note-take. Can you talk about some, about your black feminist, what black feminism offers you as creative strategies because we can identify a number of these right? Both in your thesis and in your exhibition on Mgudlandlu. Re-narrativisation, self-positioning strategies, particularly in referencing longer histories of black women's work, the use of every day small gestures, the use of autobiography or biography. So how do you harness black feminism as creative methodology within your archival, art historical, curatorial processes?"

(01:49:51)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Well I suppose it goes back to..."

(01:49:54)

Sharlene Khan: "But not only that, how do you harness black feminism in your life as a life strategy?"

(01:50:00)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "I wake up every day and black feminism is part of me. In terms of how it becomes a strategy, I think it's very indicative in my work in a sense that being unapologetic for seeking to answer questions that concern you. And allowing, again the register, the point of departure in which you talk, I cannot speak generally about being a curator. I am a Black women curator first. Yes, working in a gallery that demands me to be neutral about certain things, but my filters are already informed by that. My experiences every day, the kind of attitude I'm going to get at Shoprite Checkers when I am buying chips from a Black woman, from a male person who is helping me there, all of these things inform how is my being, it is in me and how I negotiate that. It's not... also, I feel like sometimes that people confuse it as a way of which we throw punches and you attack people. I don't go 'ting ting, black feminism thinking now', I'm going to go after... it is the way that I receive the world and I allow the world to receive me. So ja, as a term and as a theory and as a thought that I have encountered through writing, there's certain things that I have encountered through writing that oh, allow me to resonate and understand certain things about my own thinking better. But first and foremost, it's a present thing, it has always been present. To term it 'black feminism', to term it 'African feminism', are places that I have sort of found along the way that allow me to understand that this form of thinking is genderised, it is racialised, it is ethnicised and how I exist and navigate the world knowing very well that there are these filters that receive me in a particular way. And then I'm going to quote so and so and understand, ja, ja, that navigating the world is framed within this kind of theoretical way, but my existence every day, we wake up in the morning, I shower, my face is black, my boobs are there, so... there you are."

(1:52:46)

Sharlene Khan: "Alright, so Nonto, this is our version of the Marcel Proust questionnaire. Do you think that you are short in stature?"

(1:52:58)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Geez!" (*laughter*)

(1:53:00)

Sharlene Khan: "I ask because during our research, our *Art On Our Mind* has been conducting research on Nonto for like the last three months, and there are several articles that reference you are short in stature. I never considered it before, but I thought I'd ask."

(1:53:16)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Well, many well-known curators are tall, I guess, (*laughter*) and then they encounter a short curator (*laughter*). I suppose, I mean if you think about the Simon Njami's well, I mean... (*laughter*) The kind of curators that have been...long lasting conversations I've had with people like N'Gone [Fall] and Bisi [Silva] are all short. Maybe it is a women curator thing. Except for Koyo [Kouoh] (*laughter*). I don't know, I don't look at myself in the mirror and see myself as short. So I suppose there is an expectation of what a curator looks like."

(1:54:04)

Sharlene Khan: "What delights you instantaneously?"

(1:54:12)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Hmmm... Nice question, no answer. (*laughter*) An 'aha' moment."

(1:54:29)

Sharlene Khan: "Okay. What's your pet peeve?"

(1:54:33)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "These questions are difficult!"

(1:54:36)

Sharlene Khan: "Only because you trying to be smart about them."

(1:54:38)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "I'm not trying to be smart. You always have PC [politically correct] questions and then you have questions that you answer once you have had a glass of wine.
(*laughter*) Although I am..."

(1:54:49)

Sharlene Khan: "Well we can always arrange that." (*laughter*)

(1:54:54)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "To answer the question instead of trying to stop drinking, so we will see."

(1:55:05)

Sharlene Khan: "What is your least favourite colour?"

(1:55:08)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Red." (*laughter*)

(1:55:11)

Sharlene Khan: "Wrong pants. (*laughter*) Okay, who is your favourite writer? Or do you have a favourite book? Or if you were a literary character, who would you be?"

(1:55:25)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Ohhh, Purple colours. My favourite writer is Njabulo Ndebele because I think that he is a very serious black feminist. Toni Morrison."

(1:55:50)

Sharlene Khan: "I heard a few yeses in the audience there. (*laughter*) Yeah, good."

(1:55:54)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Ja, I think those two are for me, like they challenged writing, they asked us to be simple, they asked us to ask daily questions and they asked us to ask questions about our daily lives."

(1:56:12)

Sharlene Khan: "Do you have a favourite artist?"

(1:56:16)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "No, I will not answer that question, *(laughter)* that will get me in trouble."

(1:56:19)

Sharlene Khan: "Who is your heroine?"

(1:56:23)

Ntombeko Ntombela: "God, now I have to think like Zakhiti. *(laughter)* I don't have an answer. It's difficult questions."

(1:56:34)

Sharlene Khan: "If you could wish any artwork into your life or your home, which one?"

(1:56:41)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Of course - Gladys' work."

(1:56:46)

Sharlene Khan: "Is there any art movement that you despise?" *(laughter)*

(1:56:54)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Wait, I need to answer that one. *(laughter)* There's always, Gabi always talks about an art jail. I'm trying to think who's been put in that jail. Don't know."

(1:57:19)

Sharlene Khan: "Okay, that's good, for artists. What is your favourite word?"

(1:57:26)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Art." (*laughter*)

(1:57:27)

Sharlene Khan: "What is your least favourite word?"

(1:57:31)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Beautiful."

(1:57:33)

Sharlene Khan: "What turns you on? (*laughter*) Because, of course, they immediately read the erotic only in terms of the sexual, ja okay." (*laughter*)

(1:57:37)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "A funny story."

(1:57:49)

Sharlene Khan: "What turns you off?"

(1:57:52)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Narcissism."

(1:57:55)

Sharlene Khan: "What makes you laugh?"

(1:57:58)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Everything funny. I like (laughter), ja, I spend too much time watching these clips that are sent around Whatsapp." (laughter)

(1:58:09)

Sharlene Khan: "What is your idea of misery?"

(1:58:13)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Self-pity."

(1:58:17)

Sharlene Khan: "What sound or noise do you love? Now you're going to say laughter."

(1:58:27)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Well, maybe I should give my daughter a credit. Nyanyananana... but I do like that, yeah, I do." (laughter)

(1:58:35)

Sharlene Khan: "What is your favourite swearword?"

(1:58:38)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Fuck."

(1:58:42)

Sharlene Khan: "You just went for basic, ne? Okay. What profession other than your own would you like to have attempted?"

(1:58:52)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Waitressing."

(1:58:55)

Sharlene Khan: "Never did it?"

(1:58:56)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Nuhuh."

(1:58:57)

Sharlene Khan: "Okay, what profession would you not like to do?"

(1:59:10)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "I know, be a mathematician I guess."

(1:59:14)

Sharlene Khan: "What natural gift would you most like to possess?"

(1:59:17)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Super-powers of some sort. *(laughter)* With fire and things coming out of my hands I guess... flying..."

(1:59:28)

Sharlene Khan: "Okay, that is very natural, ja... *(laughter)*"

(1:59:33)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Don't birds fly?" *(laughter)*

(1:59:36)

Sharlene Khan: "If your mood were a weather forecast for this year, you'd be...?"

(1:59:46)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Happy."

(1:59:49)

Sharlene Khan: "Happy is not a weather forecast, okay." *(laughter)*

(1:59:51)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Happiness."

(1:59:55)

Sharlene Khan: "What are the ingredients for a perfect day?"

(2:00:02)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "What would constitute a perfect day? Achieving what I set out to do. I have too many to-do lists that I never get through. The day I am able to do my to-do lists, then maybe I will be happy."

(2:00:23)

Sharlene Khan: "How would you like to die?"

(2:00:27)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Ah, that's a nice question. Not in my sleep, no."

(2:00:39)

Sharlene Khan: "So you don't want to like go to bed, wake up in heaven and go, "ah fuck". (laughter)"

(2:00:43)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "No man, that's just wrong. (laughter) Just imagine. You wake up and you don't have a choice to say yes, no. (laughter) No, no, no. (laughter) Maybe like bungee jumping or something. (laughter) I think like crashing (sound effects) I think you have a moment to say "oh shit". (laughter)"

(2:01:06)

Sharlene Khan: "If heaven exists, what would you like God to say when you arrive at the pearly gates?"

(2:01:17)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "So you back?" (*laughter*)

(2:01:22)

Sharlene Khan: "Okay, so at this point, we are going to open it up to your audience. And so, any questions? Sikhumbuzo?"

(2:01:33)

Sikhumbuzo (audience member): "I want to ask Nonto, what does it mean for you as a curator to experience what Kemang uncovers in Gladys' house? Is the artwork in her own house? Also what does that mean for anybody who is making artwork, anybody who is writing or thinking? But just to experience that."

(2:02:07)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "I think it's... I don't know, I wouldn't be able to speak on behalf of Kemang, but I would assume that the idea of, as a sense of belonging, as a sense of place in the fact that this reference has been right at your door step, right? This idea that he grew up in Gugulethu and all along there was this history. I suppose as a sense of completeness, there is no value that could be given to the work that they were able to excavate in her house. There's no..., it's immeasurable the kind of wealth that that particular site holds. The memory it holds. I mean from all the writings that I was able to encounter, is that she was a very vibrant person. She seemed like kids were terrified of her, but loved her at the same time. She was an embodiment of a super-human, a strange person that lived in this house. I think it's in one of Kemang's videos, the aunt sort of describing how they thought she was crazy, and how that craziness has value today, that madness having value today. And for him to invest that much of time in reliving that or engaging with the history, I assume that that's a fulfillment that cannot be given a price. Ja, I would love to discover an artist in my neighbourhood where I grew up, because I think that suddenly means that what I am doing... I remember when I was still studying and I would come home and they would say, "what are you doing" and I would say I study art. "Oh you **udweba**, please draw me." (*laughter*) And that immediate dismissal of the value of what you do, unless

you say you are a teacher or studying medicine. “Oh you **udweba**, what are you going to become? How have your parents allowed you to do this thing?” So not growing up knowing an artist, I suppose for Kemang it's like this wealth, this amazing reference that says, “I'm not insane”, you know? (Bring him in)."

(2:05:00)

Audience member: "You spoke a bit earlier about academia and the classroom and I was wondering if you could talk a bit more about the curator's role in teaching and if there is a space for curators in the classroom."

(2:05:17)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "He he he, you want my PC answer or the straight answer? I will try and give you both. The curator's role in the classroom is one of embodiment, one of living theory, one of living practice. And I suppose my answer earlier on about the fact that I've felt and needed home, and history of art is neither in heritage, has been precisely that teacher mode is never present in my space, I'm an embodiment of what I do. I speak to practice, theory informs what I do later as a way of reflecting, but it's intuitive - it's in response to things that are happening around me. So curators do have a role in terms of informing practice. I mean one of the beautiful thing about Asiko is that, and many people attest (Gladys [Kalinchini] being one of the participants), is that the schedule changes literally every week in the five year programme, precisely because if an international curator happens to be in town, he comes and he tells about his practice. And that in a way I think shifts so much in terms of understanding the multiple ways of producing, of working as a curator, that cannot be found in text. It's in the experiencing, in learning and understanding these processes. And the evolution of curating, I mean DJs today call themselves curators, right, festival makers call themselves curators - there's a space in that. There is also a space in the fact that visual art have occupied curating the longest in the way that we think about curators as a caretaker, that kind of formation within the museum space. But today, I suppose even then curating is informed by understanding how different people work. Like I say, it's an art when you're curator, there's a second voice when you are looking and speaking to an artist that explains things in ways that aren't necessarily saying “I have this one formula - I start there and I end there”. You encounter things, you read a novel and suddenly that informs an idea.

You will see artists making work and suddenly you respond to these changes. There's an issue that is a political issue and you respond to that through making an exhibition. So there isn't one particular way in this. I don't think there's one particular way of teaching it. And then many, many curators who are in an academic space, and conferences that I have attended, people repeatedly attest to the same thing, that there is no formula of teaching it, but it is in the practice. And this is why also many curatorial programmes are tied to producing an exhibition at the end, is that you've got to, once you have understood these theories, you've got to put it into practice. But you've got to do that knowing your own style, knowing your own language, knowing your own interests, what draws you as a curator. Some say I start writing then a project comes out, so I hope that that answers you."

(2:09:11)

Songezile: "It is not about you or me or anyone else but it is about the institution itself - of learning, of teaching, how do we come to a state where we understand that what we teaching, what the students are learning, actually informs the trajectory that as a country we should be going towards? I know you were an artist at some point, you became a curator and now you are an academic, how do we then split or not split, combine these things into a curriculum that students can actually engage in and learn, not from your experience as an individual, but as we continue to be as academics."

(2:10:13)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Well I mean, it's not divorced from the individual. I think the institutions, famous words by Thembinkosi Goniwe: "the people are the institutions". What people have done and produced and made are what informs these theories. The duty I think, for us, and if we are thinking about how to center and where to center knowledge, and understand where these centers are, is by writing and reflecting on this - writing in a way that suddenly allows the language to be more generous and more general. There's an individual experience but this individual experience can be similar to another person's experience. It can speak to a specific socio-political issue that many people experience. So by starting to write about it, whether you are writing from I or a situation is happening here, that starts to inform theories. What we then often fail to do, is to acknowledge that the informal writing is as much and the informal practice

is as much important in the formal understanding of knowledge. And there is a space to push back again to say - aside Foucault, there are many Foucault's that have been writing. There are many instances that accumulate a set of thinking, a particular pattern that we can start acknowledging that that particular pattern is where knowledge is based. And how does this small encounter, small happening, inform a global understanding, but it is understanding that the investments start from being able to reflect upon these events that may be small and may be unimportant, but should find a way of informing how we think about the curriculum. It's about daring and taking those risks. I think often as academics we mistrust our own voice, we mistrust our own judgement in saying that I can collect a series of shorter essays that are punchy, that are speaking to raw things than saying, oh I just go to the canons and those who have been inserted in the canons, and I can rely on that being more authoritative than saying that these smaller voices have something to say that can actually add, if not over-do what these canons have done."

(2:13:11)

Sharlene Khan: "Tshilu, then Sikhumbuzo, and then Fouad."

(2:13:14)

Tshilu (audience member): "Heard you've got a lot Nonto and it's quite inspiring and you have thought a lot about your trajectory, what you have done. How do you foresee the five years coming next in the future? Are there any kind of projects that is very dear to you, something you have kept as something that I really want to do. So I'm more care of asking you a question in terms of future and how do you foresee yourself and project yourself in five years time as a curator or the many things you do?"

(2:13:35)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Surely, surely, surely. There are many, many, many, many proposals in my deleted computer. *(laughter)* Many proposals that have been rejected that, oh you always return to them. I am interested in a series of things and, of late, asking myself this question about my focus on black women, my focus on contemporary artists in general. I have been interested in saying that there are many general questions that we ask: so what about black women? What is it

that we, is interesting? And how not every day people are waking up and saying “I'm a feminist, I'm waking up, I'm a feminist”. *(laughter)* But what is it that probes away a creative way of existing. A project that I am doing right now, which is going to be realised in February, I'm asking the question of the alter-ego, in asking how women artists have used this notion of the alter-ego and this spans historically. And I think this is going to be my preoccupation, is that how have women dealt with certain aspects of their daily lives in creative ways. And this particular interest is coming from an old conversation I've been having with Goniwe, who always tells me about her grandmother who was in the army but how she had to dress up in a particular way for her to be able to exist. And that for me is a historical moment where the creative praxis was embodied. For her, she had to embody a particular image for not to be seen as a woman and that is an alter-ego. But today we know of Mary Sibandes, we know of Zanele Muholis, we know of a whole lot of artists who have used the alter-ego to critique societal ills. So I am interested in that as one project. Another project that I have been working on with Reshma for a long time, Reshma Chhibha. Again I have been interested in this idea of a concentrated conversation with a single artist. What does that mean curatorially to work with a single artist? What does it challenge me as a curator? At what point do I, do we negotiate - she's the maker and I am the sounding board? So those are things that, I think I am constantly asking the question what does it mean to be a curator, at the same time what does are the things that interest me? What are things that are being produced currently. Bisi always quotes this idea that we've got to evolve with times. So the exhibitions I was curating ten years ago cannot be the exhibitions that I'm curating today, otherwise I will be lost in time and irrelevant, that's a crisis. So I am interested in responding to these conversations, sustaining them. The questions are not being asked by me, the questions come back to me: so what are you doing here and what do you want from me? And that's important for me to ask myself. You know the position of the curator is also being critique in this idea of the middle-man argument where one has to answer, “what do you mean you are curating, are you taking a cut in all of this situation where exhibitions are up and artworks are being sold?”. So, again, the evolution of the curator and the questions of what does it mean to be a curator continues for me. Ja and I can talk about the deleted folders, they'll come back. *(laughter)*"

(2:17:22)

Songezile (audience member): "What does it mean for you to be a curator right now?"

(2:17:25)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "What does it mean to be a curator right now is to engage in conversation, it's to produce, to ask a series of questions, to hold a series of conversations with different people and to be able to bring those people together and ask questions through their work. That's what it means."

(2:17:47)

Sikhumbuzo (audience member): "I mean as a scholar and also as a curator, in dealing with the question of the value of the untranslatable, in relation to language, because of institution but also your involvement with Asiko - it's as a sort of a form of academy that's moving around politics, how you engage with it?"

(2:18:11)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Untranslatable... There is an interesting book which is called *There was a Goat* by Antjie Krog and in this book, it is written in quite an interesting way where the writer reveals their vulnerability in being silenced and being part of a conversation in missing the conversation and not understanding things that cannot be translated. So this book speaks about the untranslatable were a woman who had been a witness in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission speaks about experiences and gets the follow-up interview with these three academics, two Black and one White, Antjie being the white one, asking her to speak back about this particular moment where her son dies. And she recites this moment were, as an English first language speaker, this interview had to go to the point where they were conversing in isiXhosa. What becomes even an added layer is that the two Black academics interviewing one who is not Xhosa speaking but can understand. So she speaks to the dialects of language, a moment in which the conversation intensified and the language intensified to a moment of being specific to a particular place. Unless you live and speak isiXhosa of the Eastern Cape, even if you speak isiXhosa in Joburg, you will miss that translation. And she was emphasising the value of the untranslatable and the need to not be focused on it being translated. Carli Coetzee speaks against translation and saying that there's value in thinking about this moment being an exchange. So the

frustration of the first English speaker is important in being written, so she writes about her own frustrations in a sense that that moment doesn't mean that the object that was being spoken about needs to be translated. That moment is to acknowledge that there are dialects that can be missed in the moments of communication. Why am I speaking about this particular text is that in my engagement with Asiko, and in my engagement with projects outside of the academia, it's been, there are things that I cannot articulate verbally or textually about my experience that inform what I do. But they are very fundamental in the way that I bring those experiences back. Now Asiko is very interesting because it's a place, it takes place in different cities every year, and in these different cities, curators, artists from across Africa meet at a particular place - be it Addis, be it Mozambique, be it Ghana. And in that particular moment, whoever gets brought in as a facilitator, what they call faculty, myself having been to three of them, you get there. You cannot go with a prescribed workshop in mind, because you've got to keep in mind that this particular project responds to that city, it responds to the people in the classroom. You're being taught, as much as you are coming with information. And again it's those moments, how do you translate that? And that informs so much of me going back into Wits and saying, hmmm, there's so much more that I have learnt in a moment of being in Asiko, how do I bring that moment into the classroom and thinking about practice because.... someone said, describe it as it's a hot mess because all of these backgrounds, all of these contexts are in one place and have to negotiate a language that is not about translating yourself into that space, but allowing a conversation that allows us to have a conversation, right? And that things in that moment that I could never understand, context of people coming from Uganda - even if I went there and visited and know what it's like - but there are deeper things that belong there that this person has brought into the space of the classroom. Similarly I'm coming with my own background, my own understanding, how do we negotiate a conversation that starts forming this knowledge that starts informing this discipline. And I mean that is the beauty of where we are. How do we bring that into our understanding of academic work?"

(2:23:18)

Sharlene Khan: "Okay, final question, Fouad."

(2:23:20)

Fouad: "First thank you so much for sharing your thoughts and also your experiences and practice so generously in such an amazing detail. So what I was wondering, you spoke about the part of the exhibition which is now there on the screen, where you said, "oh and this is like this part where everyone is like oh that's nice", so there was this thing you know, there's more. And I'm just wondering how did it feel for you physically when you curated actually the other part where there was so many empty spaces?"

(2:23:51)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Ja, I mean I think for me it was a hard place. I think I literally had that space for two weeks and had taped things and walked through things on the floor - it was a risk that I was taking knowing very well the kind of audiences JAG has. It was a risk also even just from colleagues who are constantly saying, "but what's going to go up there?" Having to say, can we move away from a particular kind of aesthetics of exhibition because those produce conclusions, those produce - I would be walking away or getting to a point of not asking the questions that I want to ask. And the questions were about these absences, how do you reveal the absence to be apparent? It's so easy, especially when you have done so much research and someone said, "ah, but you've been doing so much research for so long" and people are going to start to wonder where this research is. And for me it was important because it was also breaking... it was important for me to break away from what became a pattern for me with curating exhibitions. Ah you pull things out, you put them together and boom, there is a beautiful exhibition that you go from one corner to the next and you understand perfectly, its absolute. And to then suddenly... I had a crisis, I had a crisis, myself, going But There's Not A Lot! and people are going to wonder and whether people are also going to get it. Ja and I suppose I think the last room was that place where I also went, felt like I have in to that old way of making. I need a place where I kind of went "okay, sure, I didn't completely fuck this one up. So I think, ja, I did betray myself to some point with that last room but it was enough to kind of tease and jostle that pattern of viewing exhibition. It was enough to also test audience expectation, whether... I mean the tannies that come to JAG wrote a lot about how they came all the way from Sandton and there was very little that they found. And those who were like appreciated the move away - one thing I didn't speak about is this concern of mine about this idea of dematerialising exhibitions, that I have been very interested in this idea of moving away from the resolute of the

object, because I think again it takes away ways in which we explore particular aesthetics - what we use as display techniques, in ways that, how does that bring us back to the fact that many, many instances you are producing exhibitions without any budget. And then we have these sort of bars, which has been, "this is the practice, there must be frames, there must be labels of this particular kind - if it doesn't fit into that, therefore, it is not a good exhibition". We haven't developed a particular aesthetic that speaks to our context. Not everyone has the budget, not everyone operates from the institution. How do we start appreciating the thought that goes in, the questions that have been asked about exhibitions, more than giving this: tick - it's white walls, tick - everything is framed, tick - everything was clean, and then, therefore, we don't even get to engage in the artwork itself?"

*****This segment is not in the videoed talk****

(Audio recording only: 2:28:00)

Fouad - audience member: "Short follow-up. It makes me so curious because you were speaking before about being a curator and taking care of things. Would it be that you also take care of empty spaces - like you were saying when you speak of Njabulo Ndebele's 'Turkish Tales' [and some thoughts on SA Fiction - article from 1984], that there is things which are waiting."

(Audio recording only: 2:28:26)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Ja. I mean his interest has been about the narratives we don't tell, and the impulse to hop onto populist narratives: "today is about politic, today is about decolonising hehe", and how the decolonising has been happening every day outside, on the fact that there is a particular view on the academic space. I remember having a conversation with Oupa Morare one day and he said you know, all of this is interesting that Fees Must Fall is happening within the university and this is not a critique on Fees Must Fall by the way, before I have hands raising. He says to me that you know we forget that there's a particular, small percentage of people who are able to go to university and there's 70% of people who don't go to university, but the learning still continues to happen. And this 70%, and their experiences, inform so much of how we even imagine economies that we come back to work from these universities. And it was interesting in thinking about the so-called 'ordinary' that Njabulo presents in the sense that the one about

'Turkish Tales' is really about how Kemal is speaking about a rural life experience and he's saying that the parallel narratives that should be told, it's not to say that decolonisation doesn't have a place, but there are other parallel stories that we in occupation to one, there is an over occupation that overlooks other narratives that could be informing the very same act. That to talk about love doesn't mean that it's less political. To talk about happiness doesn't mean that it's less political. That those stories need to constantly be at our forefront, that our views shouldn't be in a concentration of one but to rather think more laterally. So to talk about curating absent spaces, if you think about absence in a negative sense, then no, I don't curate absent spaces, but it is about understanding that there are many different stories that we don't, haven't even begun to tap into. And when I say about exhibition language, I'm thinking about it in a more broader sense. When I think about the comments you are making about Dala, we often talked about the fact that the colours, the display techniques, the tables - not to sound sort of like patronising in a way - but those strategies of there is bricks and then there happen to be a board and there happen to be a set-up of fruits being sold there - that is a resolution and that produces a particular aesthetic. How have we in our duties in saying that we disrupt the idea of the white cue from the West, to start producing exhibitions that speak to that context and how do we then theorise and give value to that particular practice? And not trivialising it as poor, but as a choice and a curatorial choice to articulate a particular thing."

(Audio recording only: 2:31:52)

Sharlene Khan: "Okay, final, final question from Palesa. So Palesa..."

(Audio recording only: 2:31:57)

Palesa: "Hi Nonto. In our last interview you said that curating can be seen as a form of caring, so what do you care about as a curator?"

(Audio recording only: 2:32:09)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "I care about - I pause because I don't want to sound like many curators I've heard "I care about artists". I care about art and I care about friendships that I have with artists."

(Audio recording only: 2:32:30)

Audience member: "Hi Nonto. I just want to thank you for this dialogue - there is a lot that I am taking from this dialogue that will benefit my creative writing process. I would just like you to please engage us on the poster."

(Audio recording only: 2:32:48)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Which poster? This poster?"

(Audio recording only: 2:32:50)

Audience member: "This one, yes."

(Audio recording only: 2:32:52)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Oh. Sharlene will answer that question."

(Audio recording only: 2:32:57)

Sharlene Khan: "So our programme is called *Art On Our Mind* after the bell hooks book *Art on my Mind* from the 80s [it's from 1994] and for me it was very inspirational, because she as a feminist theorist who deals with critical race theory, she brought that knowledge towards art, African-American art and looking at what art meant to the African-American community, in a way that for me was very unpretentious, that bordered on a sociology, but also she was speaking from experiences of self, what did it mean for her in a segregated school to have an art teacher, whether that teacher was white or black and that she loved art, and what did it mean to love art in that capacity? What did it mean to produce art? What did it mean to have photography in African-American community and for it to document their struggles? What does it mean to have the lens turned towards you? And so she goes through all of these struggles in the book, at the same time it becomes a start of a longer engagement she has with interviewing artists, African-American artists, and to having these dialogues, so that book became quite inspirational to me and certainly this formatting has come from that legacy that she's left us. And so our group became more from *Art on my Mind* to *Art On Our Mind* and the poster, the artwork is by my own mentor Lallitha Jawahirilal, an artist from Ladysmith. When she was leaving South Africa initially, at a certain point when University of Durban Westville closed down and she was

looking for a job again, she was just so sick and tired of the racism of the country - she'd come back in 1994 after being in political exile in London. And so I was lucky enough to enter a university in 1995, and so she stuck around until I finished my, I was into my MA and she completed this task and then she left - just sick of racism. And she left me with her whole collection of African literature and she left me with tapes, Miriam Makeba, tapes which was stolen and she left me even with artwork - portfolio cases, oil bars. And so using her image is really a testimony to the kinds of mentorships by women-of-colour that I've experienced and many of us have experienced, and I think this also speaks a lot to Nonto's way of working, is that we are always looking back at the women who have come before us, whether they have been acknowledged or not acknowledged. And this is in a sense, my acknowledging her. A lot of the black feminist strategies that I have come to identify, I've come to identify through her work, both in her artwork but also in her mentorship of many of us at that time."

(Audio recording only: 2:36:02)

Thando: "I even kind of lost my train of thought. Because like, okay, I was looking at these images from JAG and the NSA [KZNSA], you know kind of realised they were sort of empty, but I know from the MTN one it was like packed when it was an opening. What for you, as kind of a curator these shows, kind of what emotions kind of were going through you during the opening of those things? Because I kind of find that there's a point in time when either you were an artist or curator when people kind of first introduced into your world, really what has been happening in your head and working through gallery space. So I just wanted to find out how, where your kind of emotions or stuff, and how are those kind of important in the curatorial work when you take things away from it, maybe post-?"

(Audio recording only: 2:37:20)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "The adrenaline of putting together an exhibition. Of course it starts from this very passionate space of, "Oh I'm going to make an art exhibition about this" and the build-up is always exciting. There is always first a commitment to the project, an emotional commitment to the project that builds up. It's like ja, when you are starting a relationship I guess and you fall in love and you fall in love and you fall in love. Boom - I don't know maybe you

make babies or maybe you have a wedding and then the day after there's this post-, what we used to call post-exhibition depression. It's like "was it all worth it?" (*laughter*)

(Audio recording only: 2:38:07)

Sharlene Khan: "And all artists recognise it, right?" (*laughter*)

(Audio recording only: 2:38:09)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "And of course this is the thing that people often think that as a curator you are so far removed from that emotion, but it's your work, you have invested so much of it in making it possible. The midnight banging on the wall that last nail and trying to get the damn labels to be straight when you are so tired, is as much giving out your own creative work. This is an artwork for yourself in collaboration with other people, so, of course, you don't want to fail artists, you don't want to fail the institution, you don't want to fail the public so there is this world that is on you that often the next day it's like sho!, ja sometimes it depends on the show, sometimes one or two days you are still on a high cause you have to do a walkabout the next day and you still have to think about this more positively. But surely the post-post of it is not sadness, but its fatigue most of the time, and it's obviously an indication of how much emotion and how much banking you've done on this particular project. And I think those things are often overlooked when the position of curator is thought of, is that you're just this PC, especially when you work from institutions, like you're just doing this to tick the box cause you've got funding and you just wanna do, and it may be there are people who work that way, but even writing out proposals and I said I've got many, many and every time you come up with a proposal, it's an idea that you love, it's an idea that you want to see money first and so there's always an emotional connection. And I think, also, as black artists there isn't necessarily room to divorce your personal emotions in this, because and as I read the paragraph in contextualizing where I am, this idea that it's about this call and response, it's this call that their past and balances that are asking us to us to rectify our histories, and you are responding by putting an idea together and saying this is how I am going to respond. So always there is this, the personal connected to it that connects to the politics, in many ways."

(Audio recording only: 2:40:48)

Songezile: "For me it's just a comment on something that is of consent because in the last decade curatorship has been a very strange or very theory outside profession for any black person. It was only reserved for a particular race, but to tell our story or any story, so your involvement at the time without any form of training, in a sense I mean. Most of curators at the time went into curatorship with we're gonna tell our own stories that was breaking ground that was telling or reclaiming and speaking back. So for you ... (tell her, tell her). (*laughter*) For you, at the time, when you were telling the story without any background training whereas there were people around you forming what is important is how you tell the story. Now in our education or our curriculum we are not capturing that, that we are able to tell these stories. We are able to do these things without any of these things. So that's why I'm saying it's not a question but it is a comment or a, ja..."

(Audio recording only: 2:42:45)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "You are absolutely right and I suppose I've been lucky enough. I was talking to Sharlene the other day that I suppose I have been lucky enough to work in a space where whiteness has never been at the center. I think I would have been broken far earlier in my career if I'd been because it allowed... being at BAT Centre was absolutely important and the more that I think about it, it was bang, and I remember a moment where I said, and Zama and I used to talk about this - it's like you have to undo everything you've learnt through your degree immediately when you are confronted with a situation like BAT Centre, because there is a real life issue - people must sell their work and they must make money. Forget your theories. And you are there at the office, so you are in this very precarious position where you are looked at, you're the authority, you must come with answers. And you're like, I'm fresh from university, I don't know what the hell is happening here. But of course you want to sell, you need a studio. I had artists coming to me and saying, "I need transport money for me to go home?" So where is that in the art history class saying that we must give artists money to go home? And it was those moments for me when I was like okay, ja, how do I produce things that have meaning to my context, to my immediate space, to this particular need, what does it mean, what am I actually curating and how does this respond to these moments of need and these moments of real life experience? And I had one time an artist who came, had a show, sold one or two works, "you're not doing your work, I'm taking my work down". (*laughter*) It's those moments that you realise

that all the theories, all the framing, all the narrative, these beautiful press releases go out the window. This particular moment we have got to be real. So yeah, you are right."

(Video recording: 2:28:00, Audio recording: 2:45.03)

Sharlene Khan: "Thanks, you know I can keep doing this but... *(laughter)* We have pretty much run out of all media right now. *(laughter)* So thank you as always for your generosity ne? Alright. Thank you guys for staying til the end. Well done."

(Video recording: 2:28:03, Audio recording: 02:45:17)

Nontobeko Ntombela: "Well done to you guys."

(applause)

Dialogue ends.

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Illustrations from Ntombela's Powerpoint presented at the Talk



Fig.1: Nontobeko Ntombela, *MTN New Contemporaries*, KwaZulu-Natal Society for the Arts (KZNSA) Gallery, Durban, 2010

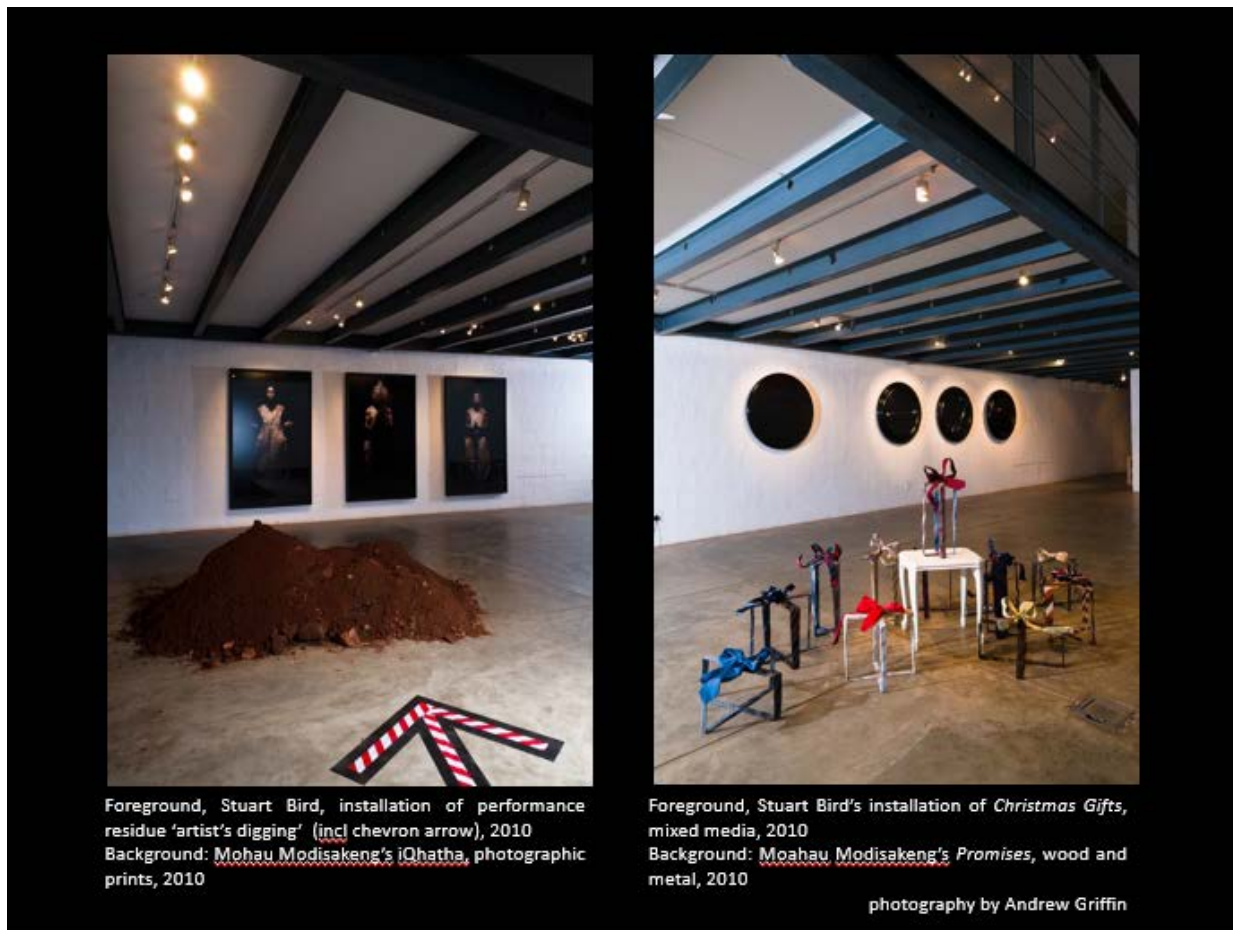


Fig.2: Nontobeko Ntombela, *MTN New Contemporaries*, KwaZulu-Natal Society for the Arts (KZNSA) Gallery, Durban, 2010

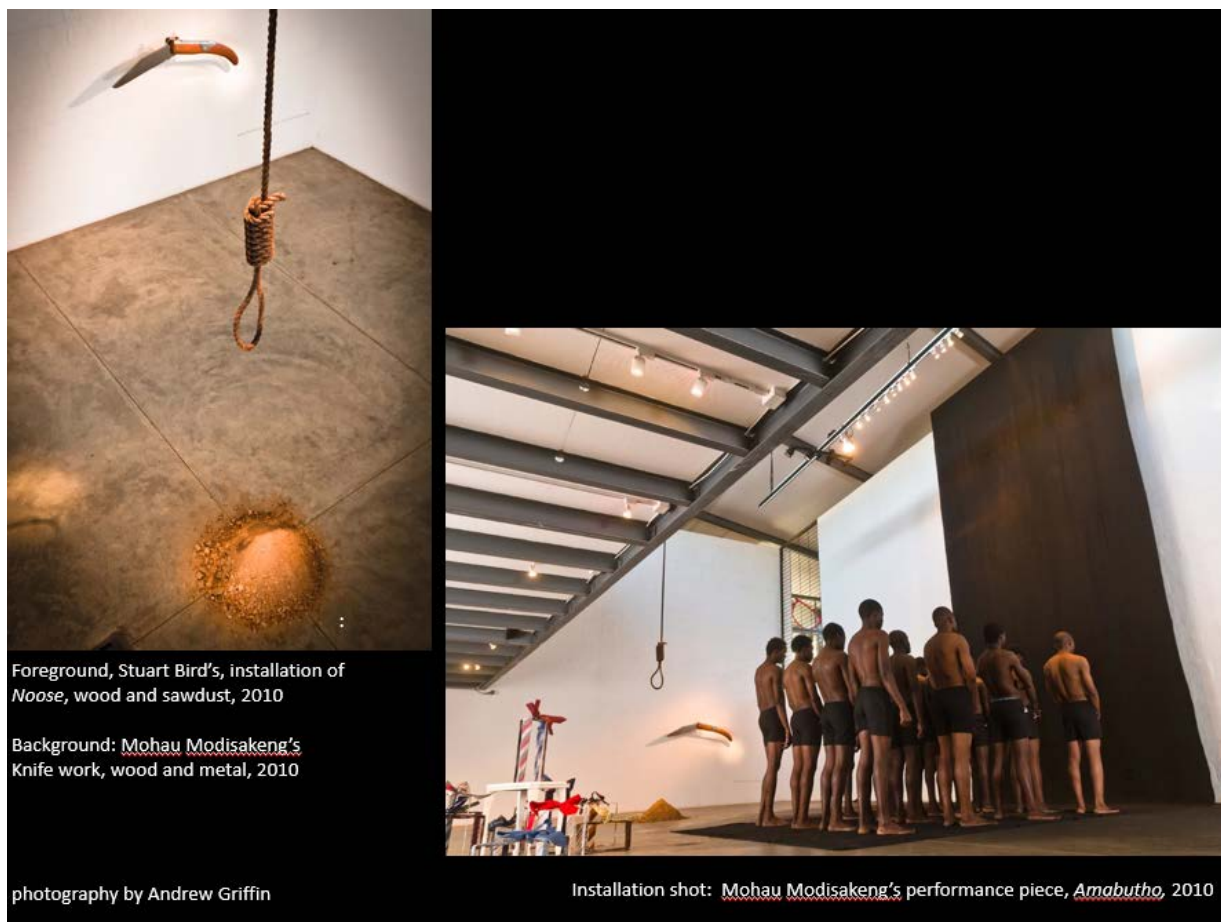


Fig.3: Nontobeko Ntombela, *MTN New Contemporaries*, KwaZulu-Natal Society for the Arts (KZNSA) Gallery, Durban, 2010

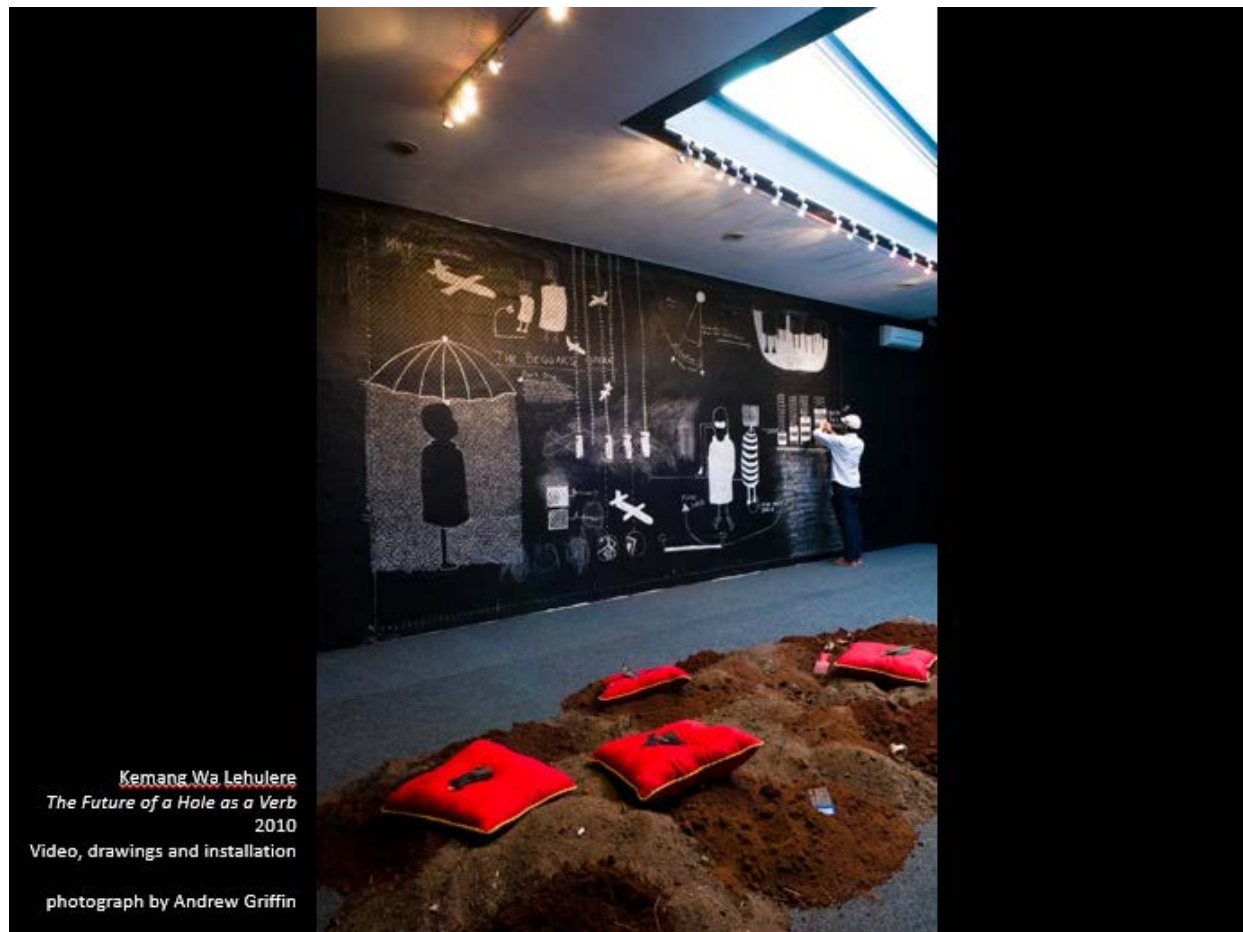


Fig.4: Nontobeko Ntombela, *MTN New Contemporaries*, KwaZulu-Natal Society for the Arts (KZNSA) Gallery, Durban, 2010



Fig.5: Nontobeko Ntombela, *MTN New Contemporaries*, KwaZulu-Natal Society for the Arts (KZNSA) Gallery, Durban, 2010



Donna Kukama,
*Like a blind man in a dark room looking for the
black cat that isn't there*
performance, 2010

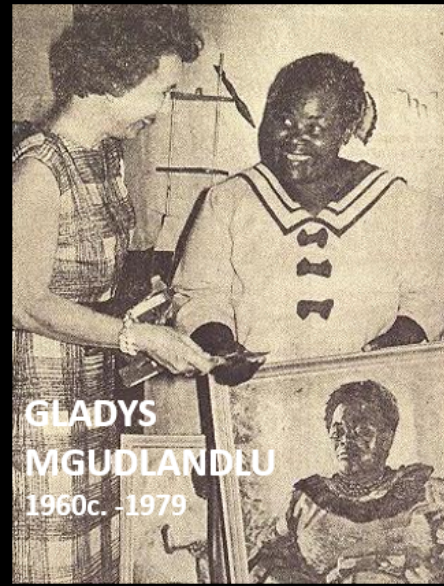
photography by Andrew Griffin

Fig.6: Nontobeko Ntombela, *MTN New Contemporaries*, KwaZulu-Natal Society for the Arts (KZNSA) Gallery, Durban, 2010

I have always had an interest in working with black women artists. This was initially sparked by the Women's Day exhibitions held annually at the BAT centre, in Durban, where I first participated as an artist (2000 - 2001) before I became the curator there in 2003. This curatorial focus has always been motivated by two things: first, my own position as a black woman curator, a position, that up until very recently (early 2000s) received scant professional space in South Africa. Second, the position that black women artists occupy in the art world more broadly, which has also been largely unrecognised.

My interests have mostly been an intuitive desire to foster conversations with people whose creative explorations help me unpack part my own daily life. But also how I have always been concerned with the precarious gendering, racialization and ethnicisation of black women's work in art writings and exhibitions. I am interested in how black women artists respond to these complexities through the use of their voices. By voice I don't only mean the gesture of speaking but rather a voice that can be heard through their artwork. This voice is steep in what Barbara Bowen describes as 'a call and response' in which ones work is constantly responding to past imbalances and how these imbalances affect us today.

It is a conversations that foregrounds complex visual modes of expressing what concerns women artists today. Thus my curatorial work is one that places emphasis on speaking; and so the conversations that I probe with black women artists are about finding ways that enable us both to speak, for us to self-write, self-articulate, self-determine, self-represent, self-empower and self-care. Thus, to focus on black women artists' work as part of my curatorial practice is, to me, not a choice but rather a way of being.



GLADYS
MGUDLANDLU
1960c. -1979




PAINTING EXHIBITION: Miss Gladys Mgudlandlu, a school teacher, whose exhibition of oils and water colours which were made in the first to be held by an African woman in Africa. Report, page 15.

Fig.7: Nontobeko Ntombela, *A Fragile Archive*, Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, 2012

A FRAGILE ARCHIVE

Gladys Mgudlandlu, Valerie Desmore,
Bongi Dhlomo, Analina Ndebele,
Noria Mabasa, Bonnie Ntshalintshali,
Helen Sebidi

Johannesburg Art Gallery
2012



Gladys Mgudlandlu (1917-1979), *Poultry*, 1961, charcoal and gouache on paper



The Johannesburg Art Gallery invites you to the exhibition

A Fragile Archive

curated by Nontobeko Ntombela

Opening reception 29 January 2012 at 4pm
29 January - 8 April 2012

A *Fragile Archive* is an exhibition on the works of a pioneering woman artist, Gladys Mgudlandlu (1917-1979). It examines the role of history, memory and archive in the positioning of this artist in public. The exhibition is centred around an installation that re-stages Mgudlandlu's first exhibition in 1961, and also includes works of other women artists selected from public collections.

For exhibition information please contact Nontobeko at Nontobeko@jag.org.za
T: +27 (0)11 725 3130/80 F: +27 (0)11 720 6000
King George St. between Wolmarans and Noord St, Joubert Park, Johannesburg
Secure parking available

Fig.8: Nontobeko Ntombela, *A Fragile Archive*, Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, 2012

[T]he archive is also always already being refigured; the technologies of creation, preservation and use, for instance, are changing all the time; physically the archive is being added to and subtracted from, and is in dynamic relation with its physical environment; organisational dynamics are ever shifting; and the archive is porous to societal processes and discourses – although at certain junctures, like the one in which South Africa finds itself now, formal conduits need to be put in place.

(Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Michele Pickover and Graeme Reid, *Refiguring the Archive* 2002: 7)

I think I can claim to be the first African woman in the country to hold an exhibition. As far as I know I am the only African woman who has taken up painting seriously. It has become my first love and there is nothing else I want to do (Exhibition by African Woman To-day, Cape Times, 15 August 1962).

THE CAPE TIMES, FRIDAY, AUGUST 17, 1962

Artist's First Pencils were Cut from Stone

VALERIE ADAMS chats to
Women in the Public Eye

A VIRTUALLY untaught artist, with her head "full of patterns and colours" that have to be expressed, is Gladys Mqudlandlu, the first African woman to hold an art exhibition in Africa.

It was opened at the Rodin Gallery on Wednesday.

Daughter and granddaughter of missionaries in the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the Ciskei, Miss Mqudlandlu began making designs at the age of eight.

"No one taught us what to do," she told me. "We had no toys, dolls or pencils, and had to make our own. We used to model our own dolls, oxen and pots out of coloured clays, adorning them as we went."

MORE NEXT DAY

"Our pencils we made by cutting stones. To us art was play. We used to play with our hand-made pots just as European children play with dolls' teasetts from shops. Then we would break them up, run home, and make more the next day."

The clay near Peddie, where she grew up, is ideal for modelling—red at Peddie, blue at Bathurst and white at Grahamstown. Whereas the Cape Town clay is not nearly so good, she said.

Before long the young girl won recognition among her own people for the boldness and originality of her designs. Because she was a 6-lb. baby, the nickname "Nomfanekiso"

("picture" or "shadow" of a human being) stuck to her. Her friends teased her and said that was why she was always making pictures.

"Everyone liked my designs. At Christmas people used to come and ask me to do the designs on the walls inside and outside their huts," she said.

"I used the brilliant local clays, and also things like feathers and kafir corn, which had never been used for this before. "It was only when I came to Cape Town I realized these things were important. To us they were just play."

Her grandmother realized how marvelously clever the child was with her hands, and "kept me busy all the time, knitting, crocheting, sewing. We carved our crochet hooks from bones, and our knitting needles from yellow wood."

At 12 she went to Lovedale where she shone at handwork, mostly with skin and leather. "I always got an A symbol for for my drawings," she said. Too young for Fort Hare, she took a teacher's certificate, got her J.C. in one year, then went to the Victoria Hospital, Lovedale, to take up nursing.

JOINED STAFF

"But I knew I was not in the right job," she said. "I felt I should be doing something else, but did not know what."

In 1944 she came to work at the Brooklyn Chest Hospital, Cape Town, and four years later joined the staff of the Athlone Bantu Community School, where she has been ever since.

Whenever I had worries I took up a pencil and started

Exhibition by African Woman To-day

THE first exhibition to be held in South Africa by an African woman painter opens in Cape Town to-day in the Rodin Gallery.

The painter is Miss Gladys Mqudlandlu, of Nyanga West, who is a teacher at a primary school in Athlone.

She is exhibiting oils and water colours.

Miss Mqudlandlu, who has been interested in painting all her life, started working seriously in 1957.

"FIRST LOVE"

She was born in Peddie, in the Ciskei, and came to Cape Town in 1944.

She said yesterday: "I think I can claim to be the first African woman in the country to hold an exhibition. As far as I know I am the only African woman who has taken up painting seriously. It has become my first love and there is nothing else I want to do."

Fig.9: Nontobeko Ntombela, *A Fragile Archive*, Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, 2012

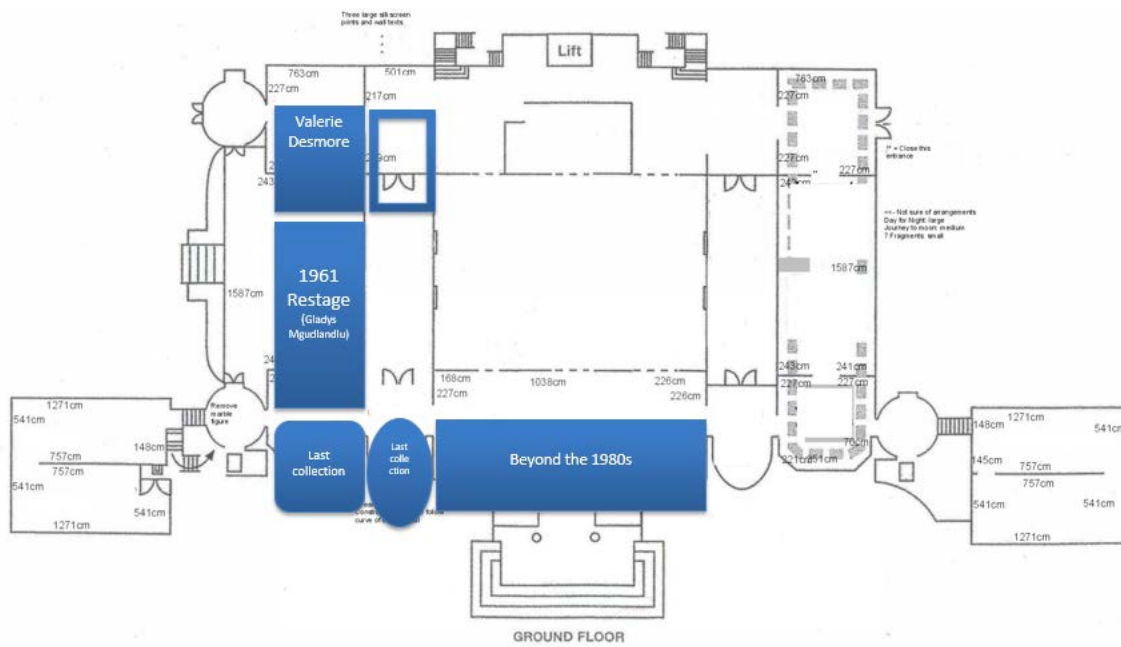
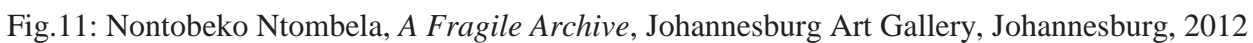


Fig.10: Nontobeko Ntombela, *A Fragile Archive*, Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, 2012



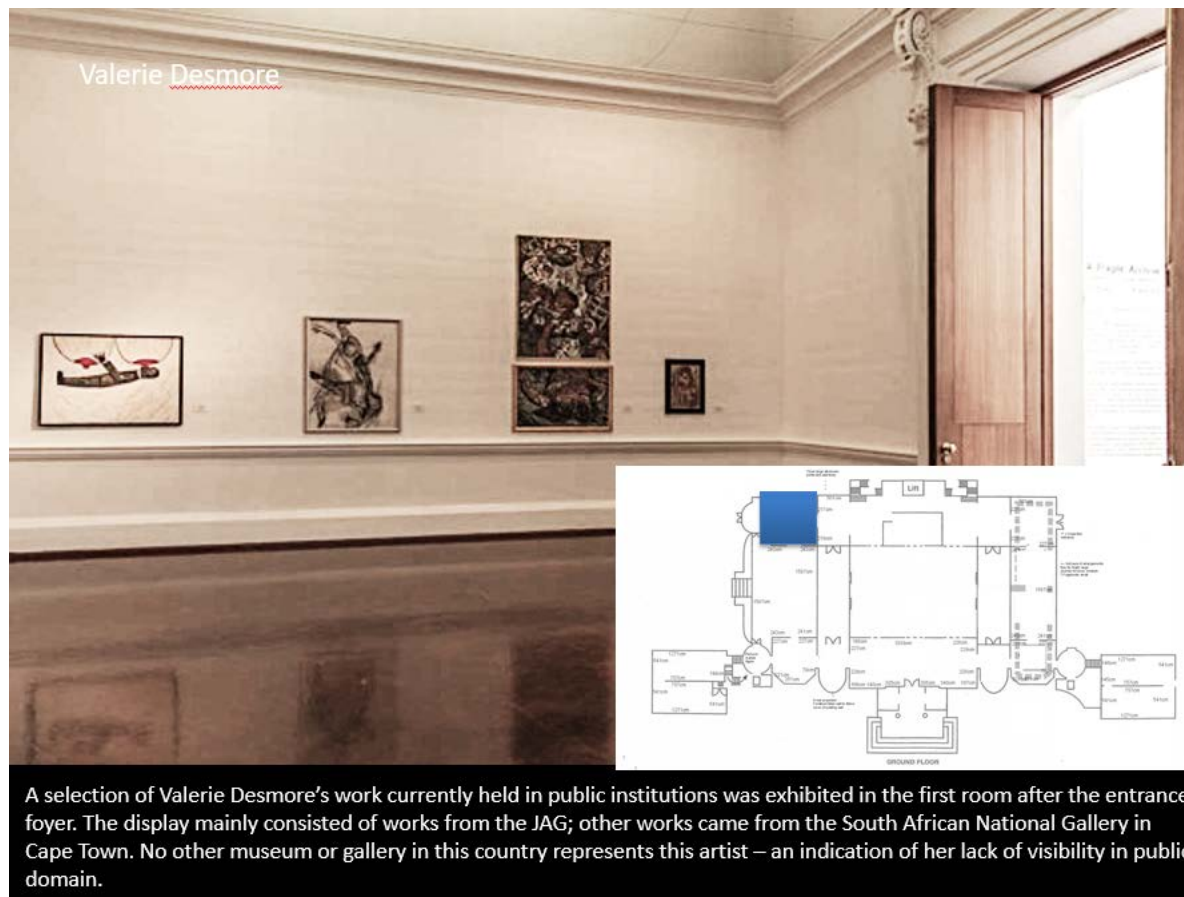


Fig.12: Nontobeko Ntombela, *A Fragile Archive*, Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, 2012

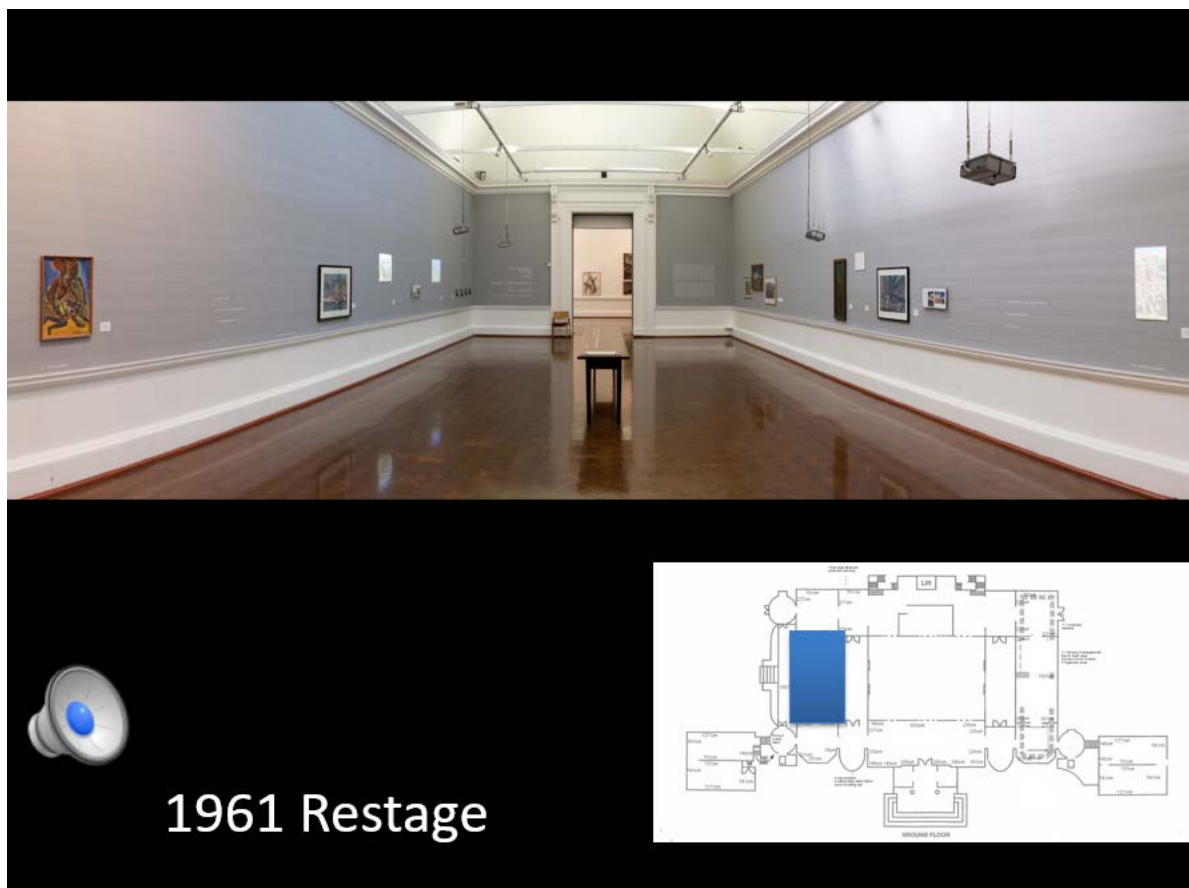


Fig.13: Nontobeko Ntombela, *A Fragile Archive*, Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, 2012

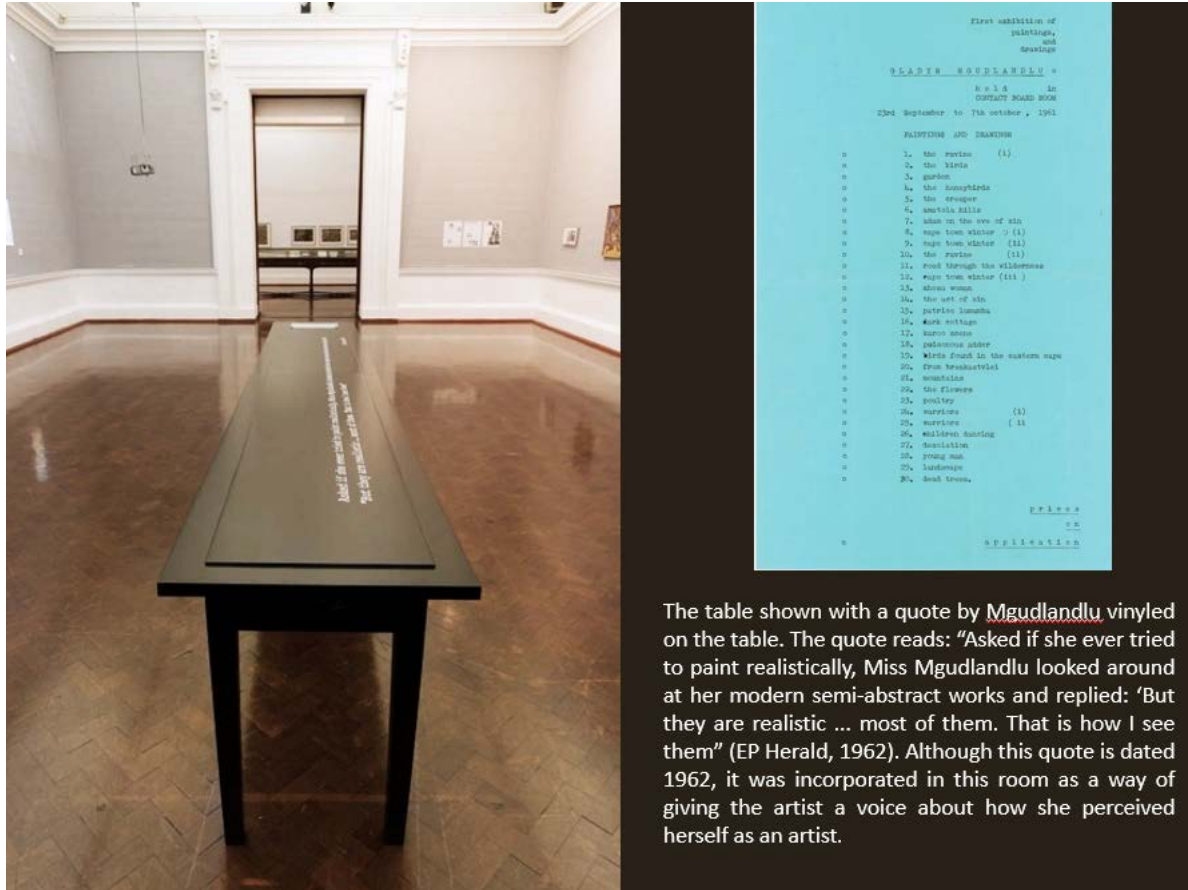


Fig.14: Nontobeko Ntombela, *A Fragile Archive*, Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, 2012

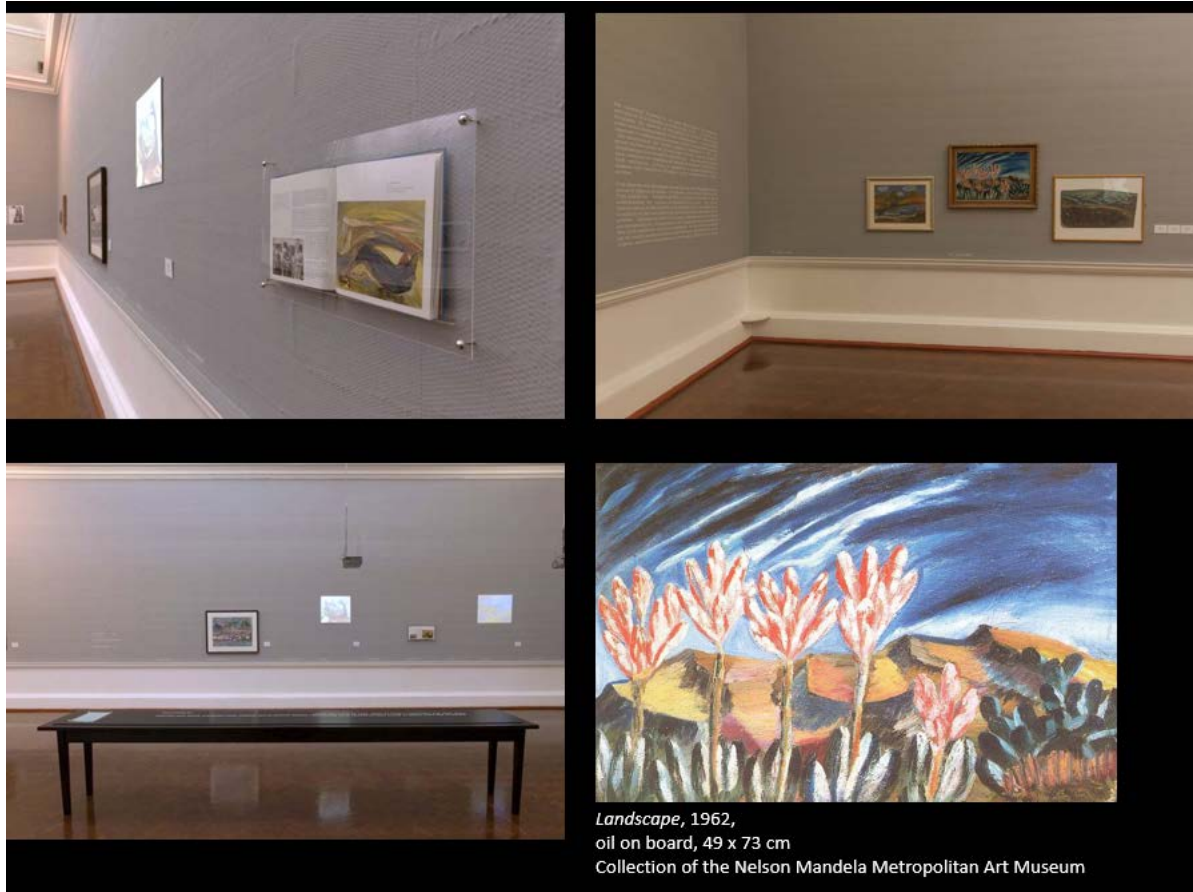
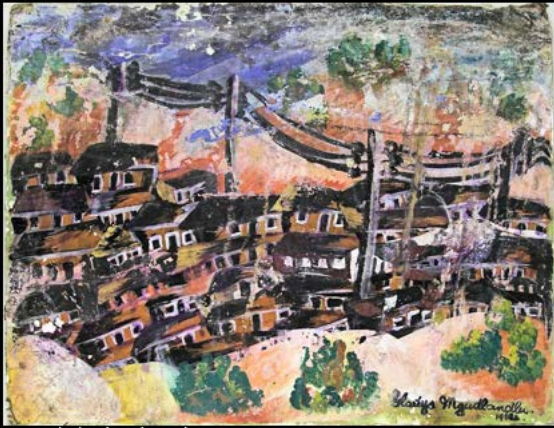


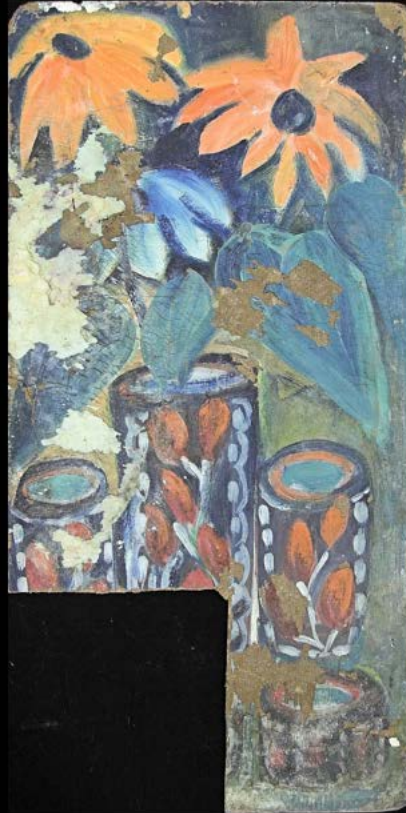
Fig.15: Nontobeko Ntombela, *A Fragile Archive*, Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, 2012



Birds, 1971, oil on board, 55 x 68 cm



Untitled, oil on board, 1964, 65 x 42 cm

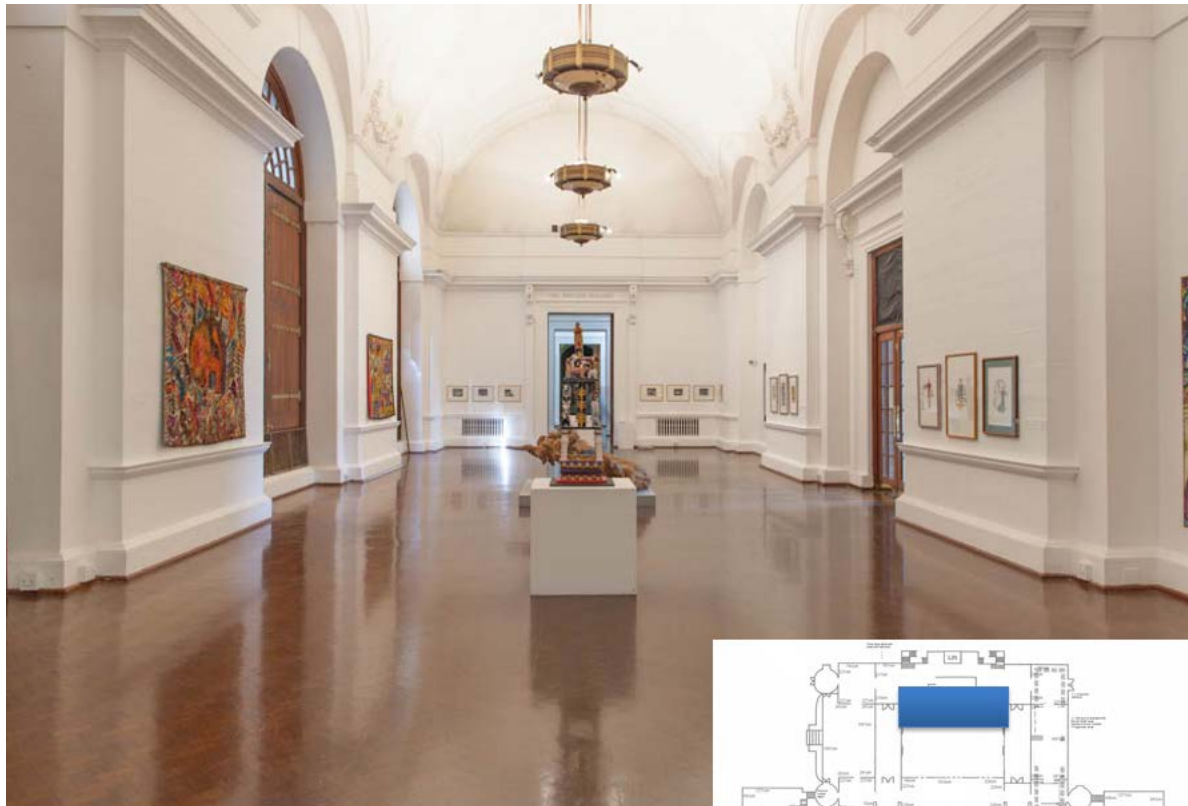


Still life, 1967, oil on board, 72 x 36 cm

Fig.16: Nontobeko Ntombela, *A Fragile Archive*, Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, 2012



Fig.17: Nontobeko Ntombela, *A Fragile Archive*, Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, 2012



Bongi Dhlomo, Analina Ndebele, Noria Mabasa,
Bonnie Ntshalintshali, Helen Sebidi

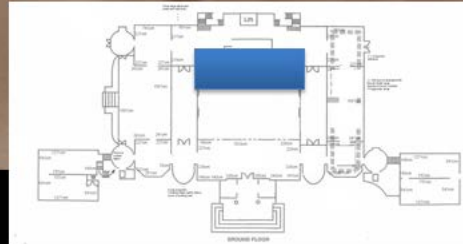


Fig.18: Nontobeko Ntombela, *A Fragile Archive*, Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, 2012

Kalashnikov Gallery presents:

The Two Talking Yonis

a solo exhibition by Reshma Chhibha
in conversation with Nontobeko Ntombela




Room Gallery, Kalashnikov and Constitution Hill
(women's jail),
08. 08. – 25. 08. 2013

Acknowledgement to Anusha Pillay

Kalashnikov Gallery	opening reception 8 August 19:00 - 21:00 exhibition runs until 25 August 2013
Room	8 August 19:00 - 21:00 exhibition runs until 31 August 2013
Constitution Hill Women's Jail	8 August 17:30 - 19:30 exhibition runs until 31 August 2013

Kalashnikov Gallery hours:
Thurs 12:00 - 16:00
Fri 12:00 - 14:00
Sat 10:00 - 16:00



Fig.18: Nontobeko Ntombela and Reshma Chhibha, *The Two Talking Yonis*, Kalashnikov Gallery, Johannesburg, 2013